

FOREWORD BY J. RICHARD MIDDLETON

BEING GOD'S IMAGE

WHY CREATION STILL MATTERS



CARMEN JOY IMES

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For Colton,

the best neighbor,

who has taught me so much

about what it means to be human.

History matters because human beings matter; human beings matter because creation matters; creation matters because the creator matters. . . . This world is where the kingdom must come, on earth as it is in heaven. What view of creation, what view of justice, would be serviced by the offer merely of a new spirituality and a one-way ticket out of trouble, an escape from the real world?

N. T. WRIGHT

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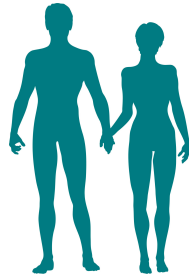
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FOREWORD

J. Richard Middleton



For a long time now I have been drawn to the idea of humans as the image of God (Latin, *imago Dei*). As a teenager growing up in the church, I was quite shy and unsure of myself. But I found the idea of being created in God's image significant for my adolescent development. Even though I wasn't entirely sure at first what it meant, the very idea of being made in God's image provided me with a sense of identity; it implied that I was of value to God and had a role to play in the world.

The first interpretation of the image of God that I encountered was what I called the YMCA model. The popular theology I was exposed to as a teenager claimed that we are like God because we have three capacities that God also does—intellect, emotion, and will.¹ Around that time, I heard that the YMCA aimed to produce well-rounded people, involving the development of our spiritual, emotional, intellectual, social, and physical capabilities. And while it wasn't quite the same, I came to think of this idea of the image as the YMCA model.

Not long after, I read the works of Francis Schaeffer and encountered his more nuanced proposal that the image was our personhood; humans are finite persons

who reflect the infinite, personal God.² Schaeffer proposed this in order to counter the dehumanization of persons he observed as a feature of the modern world. That was a valuable insight.

Unfortunately, both Schaeffer's proposal and the YMCA model shared the same two problems. First, by concentrating on the inner person (a "spiritual" reality), the *imago Dei* seemed to have no intrinsic relationship to our embodied life in the external world. Second, and more importantly, neither was rooted in Scripture.

I was eighteen when I began serious study of the Bible as an undergraduate theology student. It was during these years of study that I explored the early chapters of Genesis and became aware that the image of God is intrinsically connected with our embodied earthly life. In Genesis 1:26-28 humans are created in God's image and empowered to "rule" animals and "subdue" the earth. Given the ancient world in which Genesis 1 was written, this meant animal domestication and agriculture. By planting crops, bringing land into productivity, and harnessing animals for food and labor, we can generate a sustainable food supply, which is necessary for complex human societies to develop.

Interpreted in context, the *imago Dei* grounds the human vocation to cultivate the earth, developing its potentials.³ No wonder Genesis 4 describes the building of the first city (or settlement), the origin of livestock herding, the beginning of metallurgy, and the development of music. These things came into being because humans were manifesting the *imago Dei* by interacting with their earthly environment to bring into being new cultural developments. By engaging in ordinary human activities—in a manner that glorifies God—we represent the Creator of the universe, the king of creation, manifesting his rule in earthly life.⁴

Suddenly, the image of God was no longer confined to some ethereal "spiritual" realm, but spoke to my own concrete life in the real world. This embodied sense of the image was part and parcel of my growing awareness that the Bible affirmed this world as good (though fallen) and that God intended to reclaim the world through the death and resurrection of Christ, to bring about a new creation—not just for believers (2 Corinthians 5:17), but for the entirety of heaven and earth (Revelation 21:1).⁵

And what was my role to be in this world? Self-understanding was the first implication of the *imago Dei*. I came to see that God wanted human beings (and

Christians, as renewed human beings; that included me!) to be engaged in the world as his agents of blessing and healing.

This “vocational” understanding of the *imago Dei* began to rekindle my interest in art and poetry; it generated a desire to understand world affairs and history; it drew me to the beach and to hiking in the mountains; it helped me to participate in community and to value friendships; and it enabled me to sense (and respond to) a growing calling to teach the Bible, a deep desire to share with others what I had been learning about this amazing vision of what it means to be human.

Carmen Imes has also been grasped by this vision—and by a similar vocation. Her book *Being God’s Image* is a wide-ranging exploration of many and various dimensions of what it means to be human. She addresses how the image of God grounds our identity, no matter who we are, no matter what our mental or physical capacity. She explores implications of the image for our earthly calling framed by our hope in God’s ultimate purposes for creation. She helpfully addresses human sexuality and embodiment, disability, racism, suffering and mortality, prayer and lament, and intimacy with God.

But this book goes well beyond just the topic of the image of God or even the broader topic of what it means to be human. Carmen’s wide-ranging exploration of what it means to be human is the mother lode. But there are lots of other veins to mine.

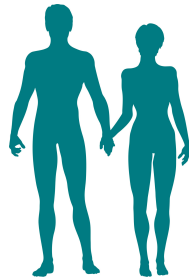
She clarifies the relationship between Israel’s calling to bear God’s name (the topic of two of her earlier books) and the broader human vocation to represent God in the world.⁶ She explores Jesus’s humanity—his weakness, his mission, and his victory. Her sketch of the meaning of Jesus’s death, resurrection, ascension, and second coming are crucial to frame her exploration of what it means to be human. There are valuable gems scattered throughout the book—on the relationship of Jews to Gentiles in Ephesians, on the true meaning of Romans 8:28, on the tower of Babel in Genesis 11, and on the significance of the Hebrew word *hevel* in Ecclesiastes (it doesn’t really mean vanity or futility or that life has no meaning). But I’ll let you discover those (and other) gems for yourself.

You could think of *Being God’s Image* as a primer in biblical theology, but one directed especially to lay Christians. You don’t need to be a theologian or a pastor to understand Carmen’s lucid writing. Yet Carmen has sneakily woven serious biblical

scholarship into what seems to be a breezy, conversational book addressed to ordinary readers.

I invite you to delve into this book and allow your vision to be expanded. Carmen will help you appreciate the tremendous love of God for all people and for all creation, a love that led the Creator to become incarnate in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, to bring healing and redemption to a broken world and a broken humanity. May this amazing biblical vision inspire and empower you to live toward your calling to be fully human in God's marvelous world.

INTRODUCTION



In *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, Lucy and her siblings explore the old professor's sprawling house, where they live during the war. In one room they discover an old wardrobe that catches Lucy's attention. Although the others quickly move on, Lucy opens the wardrobe and climbs inside to feel the fur coats. Instead of softness, she encounters the rough bark of tree trunks, the sharp branches of trees, and the crunch of fallen snow. She finds herself in the mysterious world of Narnia. There she encounters a curious faun, part human and part goat, and they have tea together before she returns home.

Naturally, her siblings don't believe her tales, which they find too outlandish. She leads them back to the wardrobe, but when they open the door, they find only coats, mothballs, and wood paneling—no magical world at all. But a few days later, the children, who are supposed to stay clear of visitors, are exploring the house when a tour group comes through. Lucy quickly climbs into the old wardrobe to hide, and Edmund follows her, meaning to tease her about "Narnia." Edmund feels his way around the fur coats, looking for Lucy, but she seems to have disappeared. He has a sudden cold sensation. He calls for Lucy and notices a dim light and moves toward it, thinking it is the door. But it is *not* the light coming through the crack in

the door. It is further up and further in, through a dark wood cloaked in winter. Edmund has entered Narnia.

What does this have to do with anything?

C. S. Lewis imagined an ordinary wardrobe as an unpredictable portal into a magical world. However impossible this might seem, it bears striking similarities to the experience of reading Scripture. Sometimes we open the Bible and turn its pages, finding nothing but fur coats and mothballs. Biblical times and places feel remote and even irrelevant. But other times, when we least expect it, we find ourselves transported by the pages of Scripture to another world. I know of no way to guarantee this will happen. And for that matter, disbelief doesn't always prevent it. Edmund is the most incredulous of all; he discovers Narnia in spite of himself.

Eventually, Lucy and her siblings *do* make it back to Narnia. Peter and Susan discover that her stories are true. But here's what fascinates me most about this analogy: Lucy, Edmund, Peter, and Susan do not just visit Narnia as outsiders. They find themselves an integral part of the story. In fact, they are the fulfillment of old prophecies about "two sons of Adam and two daughters of Eve" (that is, humans) who will reign as kings and queens of Narnia when Aslan returns to conquer the White Witch once and for all.

I can't think of a more appropriate illustration for the journey of discovery you are about to make. The Bible is a portal to another world, a world so vibrant that when we return to our own world we see it with new eyes. The fact that you do not always find this to be the case does not make it any less true (mothballs, remember?). On its pages, you will find a story that is not simply about other people who lived long ago. As you read it, you'll discover things that are deeply true about you—so true that without them you cannot fully be yourself.

A ROADMAP

This book is a companion volume to *Bearing God's Name* (IVP Academic, 2019). The order in which you read the two books doesn't matter. (Like Lewis, I've written the beginning after the end.) Together they take you on a journey through Scripture, helping you understand your identity and vocation. Since the publication of *Bearing God's Name*, the question I've been asked more than any other is how bearing God's

name relates to being the image of God. This book is my extended answer to that important question. Here it is in a nutshell: being God's image and bearing God's name are related, but they are not the same thing. Every human being is created as God's image. *Imago Dei* is our human identity. (*Imago Dei* [pronounced ihm-ah-go day-ee] is Latin for "image of God" and, for whatever reason, when scholars want to sound really serious about something, we say it in Latin. Sorry. I didn't make the rules.) Our identity as God's image implies a representational role—the Creator God appointed humans to exercise his rule over creation on his behalf. Because of human rebellion, most of us are not doing this job well; nonetheless, it remains our job. God's answer to the brokenness resulting from human rebellion was to select a single family, the family of Abraham, to mediate his blessing to all nations. Abraham's descendants, the people of Israel, become the people who bear God's name, representing him in the world in order to restore the rest of humanity to our Creator.

Jesus ties these two threads together. As a descendant of Abraham, he is the ultimate human who perfectly carries out his vocation as God's image. Jesus models for us how to appropriately exercise God's rule over creation. As an Israelite faithful to the covenant God made with Abraham's descendants at Mount Sinai, he also bears God's name with honor, bringing blessing to the nations. By our faith in Jesus the Messiah, we are included in the covenant people. We bear God's name. In Jesus we find the fullest expression of our true identity and vocation, more broadly as humans and more specifically as covenant members.

IN THE IMAGE OR AS THE IMAGE?

Without getting too lost in the weeds, I think it is worth pausing to acknowledge that some readers will find my assertions in this book surprising. It is common practice to talk about humans being made *in* the image of God. And for some people, that preposition is very important because it distinguishes between Jesus, who *is* the image of God, and everyone else, who is made according to the model he represents. The answer to this question rides in part on how one interprets a single Hebrew letter: *b* in Genesis 1:26. The preposition *b*, like most prepositions, is quite flexible. It can be translated as “in, on, within, among, into, through, at, with, by, according to, or as.”

The problem is that our English preposition *in* is also flexible, but not in the same ways as the Hebrew preposition *b*. That is, they don’t completely map onto each other. We cannot just pick our favorite translation from the list of possibilities above. We must consider the sense of the entire Hebrew phrase to determine whether such a translation is justified. According to *An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax*, “in” is an appropriate translation when the sense is *spatial* or *temporal*, indicating location or time (e.g., Judges 16:4; Psalm 46:2). “According to” is appropriate with regard to monetary standards (e.g., Numbers 18:16).^a None of these options capture the sense of Genesis 1:26.

Two categories that could possibly work with the traditional view are *realm* or *manner*. If the preposition is meant to specify the realm, we might say “with regard to” (that is, “with regard to the image of God, he made them”; cf. Leviticus 6:3 [5:22]). If it indicates the manner in which something is done, we might say “like” (that is, “like the image of God, he made them”; cf. Isaiah 16:9). Either of these options is possible, but both require the author to have in mind that the true image of God is something other than the humans God just made, namely, the incarnated Son of God who will not appear in the flesh for thousands of years. This seems a stretch, especially since Paul presents Adam as the pattern for Christ, not the reverse (Romans 5:14).^b My first professor of biblical languages warned us repeatedly not to base doctrine solely on a preposition. Prepositions are too flexible for that.

A final option seems far more plausible to me: a *b* of *identity*. As Waltke and O’Connor explain, this use of the preposition “marks the capacity in which an actor behaves (‘as, serving as, in the capacity of’).”^c This would indicate that God made humans *as* his image, to serve in the capacity intended for an image. To me, this requires the least mental gymnastics. We have two clear examples of this use of the preposition: Exodus 6:3, where Yahweh introduces himself “as El Shaddai,” and Psalm 118:7, where the psalmist says, “Yahweh is with me, serving as my Helper” (my translation). We also have a clear sense of how images functioned in the ancient Near East, which we’ll discuss later.

No matter which translation scholars prefer, all of us agree that our human identity is grounded in this affirmation and that our ethics rely on viewing every human in this light. We also agree that Jesus is the ultimate human who models for us how God intends for us to live as humans. We further agree that humans are not God. Being God's image is not the same as being God, just as an idol is not itself a god but merely represents one.

However, I think that to talk about *being* God's image (rather than being *made in* God's image) reinforces the concept that the *imago Dei* is essential to human identity rather than a capacity that can be lost. That affirmation is central to my thesis in this book and matters enough that I am willing to break with tradition to reinforce my point.

One more note on the relationship between these books: given the similarity in titles, inevitably people will refer to this one as “Bearing” *God's Image*. I have deliberately not called it that. God's image is not something we bear; it's something we are. I also won't say that we “image” God. Although our status as God's image may lead to certain actions, “image” is not something we do, but who we are. I hope that by the end you'll agree that this distinction matters.

This book begins in Genesis 1–11. [Part one](#) explores what these foundational chapters teach us about being human. Since being God's image is the primary feature that sets us apart from animals, the image of God will be the lens through which we explore this larger question throughout the Bible: *What does it mean to be human?* We'll consider how our status as God's image is expressed in our relationship with God, our relationship with creation, and our relationships with each other. [Part two](#) completes the Old Testament picture of humanity by discussing the Wisdom books—Proverbs, Song of Songs, Ecclesiastes, and Job. These books do not directly mention the image of God, but they introduce the human quest for a meaningful life and wrestle with the reality of human suffering. For that reason, they are essential to consider as we explore what it means to be human. In [part three](#), we'll move into the New Testament to offer a portrait of Jesus as the ultimate human. We'll consider the theological significance of Jesus' incarnation, life, death, resurrection, and ascension as it relates to our larger question of what it means to be human. The closing chapters will flesh out our destiny as a new humanity in the new creation. I mean this literally. We will not be floating on the clouds one day—our future is physical and embodied.

One of the most profound discoveries that will emerge from our study is that creation still matters. This created world is an integral part of our human vocation—now and for eternity. We'll take a closer look at our assumptions about the relationship between the physical and spiritual worlds, as well as what will happen to the earth when Jesus returns. Along the way, my hope is that you will gain a renewed sense of your identity and purpose, which are rooted in Scripture and by which you can live life to its fullest.

PART 1

HUMANS IN GOD'S WORLD



PATTERN OF CREATION



THE BATTLEGROUND

It's dangerous to start a book by talking about Genesis 1. The first chapter of the Bible has become a battleground for strongly held convictions about what God did or did not do and how long it took him to do it. It's likely that I won't say exactly what you are hoping I'll say. If you're especially offended, you may even burn this book. I feel the same tension every semester when I teach Old Testament History and Literature. Why does the Bible have to begin with Genesis 1? Why can't we come to it later, after we've come to know and trust each other?

Of course, it's first for a reason. How could anything come before creation? We can't very well explore what it means to be human without it.

And so here we are, you and I, with our long histories and commitments and suspicions. We're sitting here awkwardly, and you're waiting for me to make the first move because, well, I am the one writing the book. But to be honest, that doesn't feel exactly fair. If we were in the same room, I would first ask where you're coming from. I would be able to read your body language, and that would certainly affect the way I approach this issue. But we aren't, and I can't, so we're left with the unfortunate plunge I must take into the darkness. I have to take a risk. Hopefully you aren't the book-burning type.

Let me begin with my own story. I grew up attending church, and I took the Bible seriously, but it wasn't until I went to Bible college that I first learned about genre. The Bible is composed of three main types of literature, Professor Ray Lubeck told us: narrative, poetry, and discourse. Each has its own conventions; each has its own aims. A narrative involves the interaction of characters, setting, and plot. Poetry is a rhythmic composition, which in the Bible involves short pairs of lines packed with imagery. Discourse, also known as prose, includes instructions, speeches, and blocks of teaching logically arranged.

I was enthused. This was a new set of lenses for me, and I was eager to try them out. Since genre influences the set of expectations we bring to the text about the types of claims it is making, I decided I would reread the entire Bible and color the margins in one of three colors to indicate whether I was reading narrative, poetry, or discourse.

I turned to Genesis 1 and instantly hit a brick wall. I could find only one character, God, and no plot conflict as far as I could tell. The text seemed almost rhythmic, but it didn't fall into neat pairs of lines the way Hebrew poetry does. Even English translators seemed to have trouble deciding how to categorize it. Genesis 1 lacks normal paragraphs. Take a look in your Bible. I'll wait. . . . See what I mean? I was baffled.

Genesis 1 had never been anything to me other than a straightforward historical report of how God made the world. I expected to find a narrative. What I found was a hybrid genre—the platypus of biblical literature—neither narrative nor poetry nor discourse. What could this mean?

I carried that question with me into seminary, where I read an illuminating book by Henri Blocher titled *In the Beginning*. Blocher (pronounced blow-*shay*, because he's French) showed me artistry in Genesis 1 that I had flat-out missed, even in Bible college.

Now, to call a text artistic does not make it unhistorical. One could portray a historical event in any number of ways, poetically, abstractly, emotionally, or straightforwardly, and that portrayal does not change whether the event occurred in real time. However, the way an event is depicted clearly impacts our perception of that event. It conveys what the author wants us to see about it. (The converse is also true: just because a text seems straightforward doesn't make it historical. *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* or *Ramona Quimby, Age 8* seem plausible enough, but they are both quite fictional.) To complicate matters, the truth value of a particular text does not rest solely on its connection to actual events. The Chronicles of Narnia are in no sense historical, but they powerfully convey truth about the way things really are.

So back to Genesis 1. Blocher convinced me that Genesis 1 was highly sophisticated literature. Here's another thing I realized: the debate over *how* creation happened often eclipses the theological question—*why* it happened. Why did God make the world and everything in it? Why is the act of creation portrayed in this way? Why does it matter? Ironically, in spite of vigorous disagreements over the *method* of creation, the *purpose* of creation is clear to those who read carefully.

In spite of vigorous disagreements over the *method* of creation, the *purpose* of creation is clear to those who read carefully.

Bible-believing Christians land across the spectrum on *how* God made the world. I have Christian friends who are fervent defenders of six-day, young earth creation (the view that God made the earth in six days around 4000 BCE), and other Christian friends who embrace theistic evolution (the view that evolution is the method God used to create all things). Others stand between these two poles. These friends all hold one thing in common: they believe in the authority and inspiration of the Word of God. Where they differ is on the question of genre.

My goal is not to change your mind on this issue but instead to invite you to set aside your conviction about *how* God made everything long enough for us to consider *why*. This will matter for the question of human identity and purpose.

A TEMPLATE

One way to minimize the risk of importing our own ideas into the Bible is to pay attention to how the author uses patterns to create emphasis. Blocher helped me see that Genesis 1 is a carefully crafted work of art that conveys the symmetry and order of God's design. Against the backdrop of the "formless and empty" world in Genesis 1:2, where the deep seas churn in darkness, in six days God brings order to creation. The first three days depict God's ordering of habitable space, while the last three depict God's creation of residents to dwell in those spaces. To put it another way, God takes the "formless and empty" world and gives it "form and filling."

Here's what I mean: On day one, God creates light and separates it from the dark. We're not told the source of the light or how it is regulated. "Evening" and "morning" mark off the first day. But it's not until day four that God creates the sun, moon, and stars. This is the day in which the domains of light and darkness are populated with residents. Although the heavenly bodies are not living, they are appointed "to govern the day and the night, and to separate light from darkness" (Genesis 1:18). They also "mark sacred times, and days and years" (Genesis 1:14). That is, they designate festivals and cycles of time. Day four is far more than the origin story of the sun, moon, and stars. It unveils their purpose. Days one and four together celebrate the origins of the calendar and the basis for human culture. Although the lights are embedded in the heavens, their purpose is to illuminate the earth. Here is our first clue that Genesis 1 is something more than a historical report. The heavenly bodies that mark "days" are not yet present for "days" one, two, and three. The days of creation must be a way of framing the creation event (see fig. 1.1).¹

DAYS OF CREATION		PURPOSE
DOMAINS	RESIDENTS	
DAY 1 Light (separated from darkness)	DAY 4 Sun, Moon, and Stars	TIME (Festival Calendar)
DAY 2 Skies (seperated from water)	DAY 5 Birds and Fish	AIR (Ordered Space)
DAY 3 Dry Land (seperated from water) Vegetation	DAY 6 Land Animals Humans	LAND and FOOD (Habitable Space)
DAY 7 Blessing of the Seventh Day (to seperate it from the other days)		REST

Figure 1.1. The symmetry of God's creation in Genesis 1

The symmetry continues with days two and five. On day two, God separates the waters above from the waters below, opening up the skies between them. Ancient people imagined a dome that held back the waters of the sky, resulting in open air. (They knew the sky held back water because sometimes it leaked out and watered the earth).² On day five, God populates the domains of sky and water with birds and fish. God blesses these first living creatures with the mandate to multiply and fill the waters and the air (Genesis 1:22). Again, we have both form and filling, resolving the “formless and empty” problem from Genesis 1:2.

Days three and six are special, each containing a double creation event. On day three, God separates the waters and the dry land. Then he creates vegetation with fruit and seeds. That is, he makes food, though no one is present to eat it yet. All of this is preparation for day six, during which God makes land animals and then humans to populate the dry ground.

God gives humans a special status as his “image.” According to Genesis 1:26, our human identity as God’s image entails a responsibility to “rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky, and over the beasts, and over all the earth, and over all the creeping things that creep upon the earth” (my translation). Like the sun, moon, and stars, humans have a governing role in creation. While the heavenly bodies bring order to the calendar, humans bring order to all other living things and their habitats. As with the fish and birds on day five, God blesses humans with a mandate to multiply and indicates that the food source for both humans and animals is the vegetation provided on day five.

Genesis 1 insists that humans are the climax of God's creative work and the crown of creation.

Understanding days one through three as domains and days four through six as residents helped to solve certain conundrums that had puzzled me. (How is there light with no sun on days one through three? How do plants survive without the sun? Why do fish and birds get their own day apart from the other animals? How are some animals already domesticated before humans exist?) To tell the story of creation as unfolding over six days is a way of organizing the cosmos into habitable spaces and their inhabitants, gradually bringing order to disorder through separation (light from dark, sky from water, dry land from seas).

Blocher also demonstrates how the rhythmic feel of Genesis 1 was achieved by the repetition of certain words and phrases in sets of what he calls “symbolic numbers.”³

- “God said” occurs 3x for humans and 7x for everything else (=10x).
- “Let there be” occurs 3x for heavens and 7x for the earth (=10x).
- “To make” occurs 10x.
- “According to their kind” occurs 10x.
- “Blessed” occurs 3x.
- “Create” occurs in three places in Genesis 1, and the last occurrence is triple.
- “And it was so” occurs 7x.
- “God saw that it was good” occurs 7x.

Blocher points out that none of these sevens corresponds precisely to the seven days. He concludes, “Here we have no ordinary history, such as might be written in response to a simple request to be told what happened. Here we have the work of a Master whose thought is profound and expansive.”⁴ Why would someone go to all this trouble to consciously arrange creation as a week? Blocher suggests that the week of creation is meant to be the “archetype of human work” providing a “theology of the sabbath.”⁵ This message is clear whether you read Genesis 1 as a historical account of how God made the world or as a liturgical celebration of God’s purpose in creation. Either way, the week is a template for humans.

Perhaps your head is spinning now. Mine was, too, when I first discovered all this. It has helped me to realize that the Bible was not written to answer *my* questions. It often does, of course. But the Bible addresses ancient people in an ancient culture using a language that is not my own. The Bible was inspired by God to address *their* questions and concerns in language that made sense to them. It is only after attempting to read it with these concerns in mind that I can begin to consider its relevance for contemporary debates.

Ancient people were apparently unconcerned about the origin of physical matter.⁶ Their creation myths relate to purpose rather than process. This is not to suggest that the methods of creation don’t matter, only that ancient people weren’t wondering about it. What they cared about was fruitfulness. If food didn’t grow, they could not survive. We’ll return to this idea in a moment.

SCIENCE AND THE CHRISTIAN

The relationship between Christianity and science is complex. Some Christians consider it a virtue to cast doubt on scientific theories. Scientists, like anyone else, can be guilty of allowing pre-commitments and presumptions to skew their assessment of the data, preventing them from reaching accurate conclusions. But is it also possible that Christians have dismissed scientific theories prematurely because they hastily presume a conflict with biblical teaching? The adversarial relationship between some forms of Christian teaching and science seems unnecessary. In fact, most of the founders of modern science were Christians.^a

A further layer of complication arises when we consider that we have to reckon not only with modern science but with ancient science too. Biblical authors communicated in ways that made sense in their own contexts. God does not seem concerned about flawed scientific theories of ancient times. God does not correct their science.

For example, Genesis 1 does not bother to teach us that the moon does not produce its own light but rather reflects the light of the sun. It does not classify the sun as a star. It assumes the conventional ancient view of how the cosmos is arranged, with a “vault” or expanse studded with stars to hold up the waters above the sky (Genesis 1:6; see [fig. 1.2](#)). Genesis 1 does not distinguish between the thirty-five phyla of the animal kingdom that we learned in school. Sea creatures of various kinds are all called “fish,” and flying things are all called “birds”; land animals fall into only three categories: wild animals, livestock, and “creatures that move along the ground” (Genesis 1:26).

This is not to say that God is content with our false ideas of reality. The Bible corrects these at every turn. Genesis 1 is a striking correction of the ancient idea that the world was birthed in a great conflict between the gods, and that the gods created humans to do their dirty work. Genesis 1 also provides guardrails for ideas associated with modern science. Whatever we conclude about how the world came to be, if we take Scripture seriously, we cannot conclude that humans are merely a product of time and chance. Genesis 1 insists that humans are the climax of God’s creative work and the crown of creation.

ANCIENT ISRAELITE COSMOLOGY

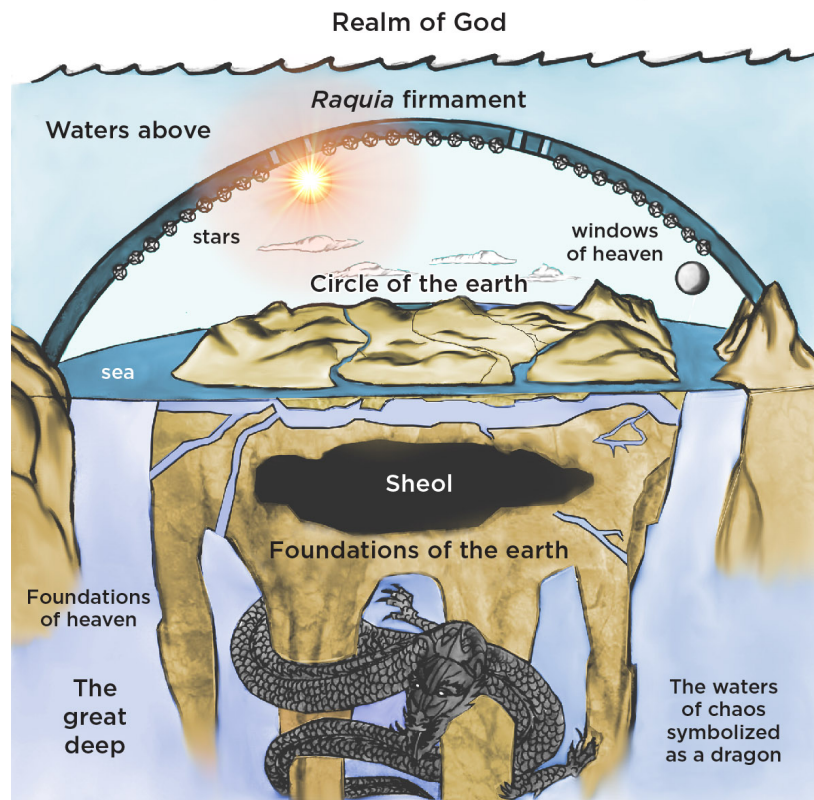


Figure 1.2. Illustration of ancient Israelite cosmology

HIDING IN PLAIN SIGHT

Have you ever looked at a work of art with a group of people for a while and then discussed it? The longer you look, the more you notice. If someone in the group actually knows something about the painter or about art history or the period in which the painting was produced, the group discussion can show you just how much you missed at first gaze. Reading the Bible with others can teach us so much that we would miss on our own! We each bring different strengths and life experiences to the text that prompt us to notice different things about it. One way to guard against projecting our own views on the Bible is to read it in community, where others can honestly say, “I’m not seeing what you’re seeing.” (Another way is to publish your interpretation of Scripture, and kind readers will offer gentle correction.)

The problem with reading familiar biblical texts is that we think we already know what they say. Our eyes glaze over, and we miss details that hide in plain sight. The solution to this problem is to slow down; read thoughtfully in more than one translation of the Bible, preferably with others; and ask lots of questions.

In the previous section, I showed you the organizing framework of the creation story in Genesis 1—form and filling. Now I’d like to take you back through Genesis 1 to point out some other fascinating details that underscore the need to read carefully. In Genesis 1:1, we are told that “God created the heavens (*shamayim*) and the earth (*’erets*).” It seems to be a done deal. However, in Genesis 1:6, God creates the “expanse” or “dome”⁷ that separates between the waters above and below and calls that “expanse” the “heavens” (*shamayim*). In Genesis 1:10, God creates the “earth” or “land” (*’erets*). These should be clues about how to read this chapter. How can God create what has already been created? One possibility is that Genesis 1:1

offers a summary of God's entire work of creation while the rest of the chapter gives a step-by-step account of how God did it. I've already suggested that the step-by-step approach raises some interpretive problems. A more likely possibility is that Genesis 1:1 offers a summary of God's entire work of creation, using "heavens and earth" in this initial verse generically, the way we might say "A to Z," including everything in between. Later uses of *shamayim* and *'erets* in this chapter are more specialized, referring more specifically to the visible "sky" (Genesis 1:8-9) and the dry "land" (Genesis 1:10-11). It would not make sense to import these senses of *shamayim* and *'erets* from later in the chapter back into Genesis 1:1, as if it announces only that God made the "skies and dry land." (Besides, in Genesis 1:2, the *'erets* is covered with water!) Context always determines what a given word means. This principle will help us in other passages, too.

The accounts of days five and six have other details worth mentioning. One thing you might miss in your English Bibles is that on day five, God first creates "mighty sea serpents" (*hattanninim haggedolim*; Genesis 1:21, my translation) before the rest of the swarming creatures of the sea. The sea serpent does not reappear until Exodus 7:10-12, when Aaron's staff becomes a *tannin* and swallows Pharaoh's. There the Creator God subdues the human whose rule represents a perversion of the mandate to care for creation. Pharaoh acts more like a sea monster than a human made in God's image. Later in the Old Testament, a *tannin* is named Leviathan (Isaiah 27:1) and used as a metaphor for Pharaoh, whose arrogance merits judgment (Ezekiel 29:3; 32:2). The cumulative effect of these references is to demonstrate God's sovereignty over all created things, whether human or animal, even those we find scary or untamable (see Job 41).

As noted above, God creates both wild animals and "livestock" on day six (Genesis 1:24-25), as well as crawling things. It's fascinating that domesticated animals already appear in this chapter before humans can domesticate them. The categories of living things described in Genesis 1 represent them as they are later understood by developed communities.

It's also worth noting that God calls for the land to bring forth living creatures "according to its kind." This way of describing the creation of animals emphasizes their connection to the land. In contrast, humans are directly created by God in Genesis 1, implying our kinship with God. In God's words, humans are "according to our image, according to our likeness," rather than "according to its kind" (Genesis 1:26).⁸

Michael LeFebvre offers a compelling account of the *why* behind the creation account in his book, *The Liturgy of Creation*.⁹ His conclusions dovetail nicely with Blocher's insights in the section above. He begins by thoroughly investigating biblical "dates" in the first five books of the Bible, such as "on the first day of the third month." LeFebvre concludes that these dates are not journalistic but liturgical. That is, the Bible's first five books consistently use dates not to tell us when events took place in history but to communicate when Israel's festival celebrations of those events ought to occur. Dates coordinate the festivals with the events that inspired them.

Building on this work, LeFebvre suggests that the creation account is formed as a liturgy, or script used for public worship. Its primary concern is fruitfulness, and it sees God as the model farmer who cultivates land so that it is ordered and fruitful. The seven-day framework for the creation account was designed as a template for the Israelites' work week, a pattern to emulate that would result in the fruitfulness of their land and their people.

The seven-day framework for the creation account was designed as a template for the Israelites' work week, a pattern to emulate that would result in the fruitfulness of their land and their people.

So there you have it. We've navigated the first chapter of Genesis. And if you're still reading, it means you haven't burned this book, at least not yet. Thank you! We have a lot more ground to cover.

SABBATH REST

The beautiful symmetry between the first three and last three days of creation prepares us for the climax of creation on day seven. Scribes added chapter and verse divisions hundreds of years after the text was written. Their break between Genesis 1 and 2 is unfortunate because God's creative work is incomplete until Genesis 2:1: "Thus the heavens and the earth were completed and all their multitudes" (my translation)—that is, all who populate those spaces, including sun, moon, stars, and creatures of sky, sea, and earth.

Although the work of creation is finished in Genesis 2:1, the liturgy of creation doesn't reach its climax until Genesis 2:2-3: "By the seventh day God had finished the work he had been doing; so on the seventh day he rested from all his work. Then God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it he rested from all the work of creating that he had done."

We're told that God "sanctified" or "made holy" the seventh day. He set it apart so that it was not like other days. The blessing of the seventh day is an oasis of rest so that labor does not become monotonous or oppressive. By setting aside a day for rest, God institutes a perpetual rhythm to the human week.

But why a seven-day week? Unlike every other ancient calendar system, the seven-day cycle is not based on celestial bodies.¹⁰ It depends instead on divine command. In Hebrew, "seven" is the number of completeness.¹¹ It becomes the basis for the weekly calendar, the seven-year cycle of agriculture, the length of various feasts, and the length of the priestly ordination ritual.

Not only does the seventh day crown the symmetry of the first two sets of three days, but it signals that rest is the "end" of creation. Scholars often refer to this as a *telos*, which includes the ideas of its completion and goal. We typically associate rest with being tired, but God is not taking a nap because creating everything wore him out. God's rest on the seventh day is similar to a king's rest on his throne. For example, in 1 Kings 8:56, Solomon acknowledges that Yahweh "has given rest to his people Israel" by establishing Solomon's kingdom.¹² Isaiah 66:1-2 speaks of God's rest:

This is what the LORD says:

"Heaven is my throne,
and the earth is my footstool.
Where is the house you will build for me?
Where will my *resting* place be?
Has not my hand made all these things,
and so they came into being?"
declares the LORD.

Notice the connection between creation, temple, and God's throne in that passage. With his realm in order, God presides over it by resting on his throne. Psalm 132:7-8 expresses it this way:

"Let us go to his dwelling place,
let us worship at his footstool, saying,
'Arise, LORD, and come to your *resting* place,
you and the ark of your might.'"¹³

God's rest on day seven has made many scholars wonder whether Genesis 1 could be considered a temple-inauguration text. Since God's rest is a template for ours, we need to explore this possibility.

THE BABYLONIAN "EPIC OF CREATION"

Comparing the biblical creation accounts with others from the ancient Near East helps us understand the basic worldview of ancient people—their concerns and questions, and the ways they answered them. Here's one example: the Babylonian creation myth, also known as the *Enuma Elish*, depicts a battle between the gods, which Marduk wins.^a He then creates the heavens and earth by stretching out the severed body of his slain great-great grandmother, Tiamat. He sets up constellations to resemble various gods and to mark days, months, and years (V:4-49). By creating the world, Marduk "designed his prerogatives and devised his responsibilities" (V:67). Marduk's mother pronounced his work "good" (V:82). Afterward, all the other gods built him a sanctuary in Babylon where he reigned as king and they could all "rest" (VI:51-54). In fact, the gods' need for "rest" was the key instigator of the initial battle between the gods that resulted in the creation of the world (I:122) as well as the flood. The Bible presents Yahweh, the God of Israel, in contrast to this portrait of the gods of other nations. Yahweh and the gods of Babylon have radically different dispositions toward the world. The gods of the nations are like oversized humans, requiring sleep and needing someone to provide it for them. In the *Enuma Elish*, the gods whine until they have an opportunity to sleep while the Bible insists that Yahweh never sleeps (Psalm 121:3-4). In [chapter two](#) we'll talk about how the Babylonian "Epic of Creation" depicts the origin of humans.

People of the ancient Near East associated creation with temples and temples with gardens. Temples were central to ancient life, and creation was not complete until a god took up residence enthroned in the temple.¹⁴ Temples typically had gardens attached to them. What's more, temple inaugurations often spanned seven days.

Not surprisingly, Israel's temple was decorated with imagery reminiscent of the Garden of Eden, including cherubim to guard the entrance to the central part of the sanctuary. According to Psalm 78:69, God established the temple to resemble all creation. So the Israelite temple is modeled after creation. But does it work the other direction? Could ancient Israel's creation story be a temple-building text? John Walton says yes, concluding that "when God takes up his rest in this cosmic temple, it 'comes into (functional) existence' . . . by virtue of his presence."¹⁵ If he's right, then all of creation is a temple, built to facilitate the worship of God. It may be significant, then, that unlike the other days of Genesis 1, the seventh day does not end. That is, day seven lacks the "morning and evening" that concludes days one through six; God's rule is unending.

But seeing the creation account as a temple-inauguration text does not eclipse the idea that Genesis 1 functions as a template for human work as well. If LeFebvre and Blocher are right that the creation week is a template for human society, then God's seventh-day rest may lead to our most important takeaway.

If you grew up in a conservative Christian context, as I did, you might associate keeping the Sabbath with legalism. For Jews, messianic Christians, and Seventh-day Adventists, Sabbath begins Friday evening and lasts until Saturday evening. Most other Christians observe it on Sundays in memory of Jesus' resurrection on the "first day of the week." During my childhood, the list of activities that we avoided on Sundays included paid work, shopping, eating out, travel, yard work, school work, and significant household chores. My dad was a self-employed remodeling contractor, but I don't remember him ever going to a client's house on a Sunday except for rare plumbing emergencies.

At the time, I didn't fully appreciate how these rules made space for flourishing. I come from a family of hard workers. By setting aside a day to rest, we guarded against the idolatry of workaholism. Sabbath carves out family time when we can celebrate and enjoy the fruits of our labor in a culture where work is otherwise nonstop. Since those childhood days, work has stretched its tentacles into every waking hour with nonstop digital notifications. Now more than ever, God invites us to trust his provision by setting aside our work one day a week.¹⁶

Sabbath calls us to stop working like slaves and start living like members of God's royal family. To rest requires trust in God's gracious provision. But it goes even further than that. In Egypt Pharaoh's resistance to Sabbath underscores his exploitative labor policies. Pharaoh chides Moses and Aaron for "stopping" (literally "sabbathing") the people from their work (Exodus 5:5). Yahweh, the God of Israel, guarded against human exploitation when he commanded Israelite heads of household to ensure that the rest of the household could rest (Exodus 20:8-11), and he grounded this command in the creation week. Children, servants, immigrants, and even animals are free to rest. The Sabbath is for everyone.

KEY IDEAS

- Attention to the literary design of Genesis 1 reveals its primary concern with order and fruitfulness. The God who creates brings order to creation so that it is no longer "formless and empty" but rather filled and fruitful.
- Creation is a cosmic temple in which Yahweh is to be worshiped. Yahweh presides over creation but appointed humans as rulers over creation, tasked to maintain order.
- The portrayal of God's creative work in six days followed by rest provides a pattern for humans to emulate. We are to work for six days, bringing order to creation, and then take a day off to enjoy the provision of the divine King.

DIGGING DEEPER

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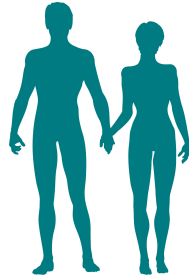
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BibleProject Videos: "Heaven and Earth," "Sabbath," "Genesis 1."

QR codes for BibleProject videos available at the back of the book.

CROWN OF CREATION



A ROYAL FAMILY

Sabbath is the culmination of the creation week, but humans are the crown of God's creative work. Genesis 1 devotes more words to humans than to any other created thing. We share day six with the creation of land animals, but God saves the best for last. Unlike the animals, which God makes "according to their kind," God makes humans to be like himself.

So God created humankind as his own image,
as the image of God he created them;
male and female he created them. (Genesis 1:27, my translation)

Throughout history, people have pondered what it means for humans to be the *imago Dei*. Our status as God's image clearly sets us apart from the animals in some way. Is it our intellect? Our emotions? Our self-consciousness? Our capacity for relationship?¹ Two lines of evidence form the foundation for my approach to this question: (1) ancient culture and (2) other passages of Scripture. Ancient culture can help because the Hebrew word *tselem* ("image" in English) has a sister word in

other ancient languages. In those languages it is clear that a *tselem* is something concrete. It refers to the idol or statue of a god in its temple.²

We've already considered the possibility that Genesis 1 is a temple creation text. Could it be that the Israelite temple lacks a Yahweh idol because God has already placed an image in his cosmic temple? Just as a statue of a god is intended to represent that god's claim to a particular area, so humans are the physical representation of the Creator God on earth. And just as an idol is meant to deflect praise to the actual deity, so humans are to deflect praise to Yahweh. Theologian Marc Cortez calls this "representational presence":³ "We need to view the *imago Dei* as a declaration that God intended to create human persons to be the physical means through which he would manifest his own divine presence in the world."⁴ God is not usually visible, so he appoints humans to remind creation and each other of his presence. Because God rules the world, our representative role includes ruling on God's behalf. N. T. Wright says we are to be an "angled mirror, reflecting God's wise order into the world and reflecting the praises of all creation back to the Creator."⁵ That's a good way of putting it.

The concept of rulership is clear in Genesis 1. Genesis 1:26 and 28 frame the announcement that humans are God's image; both speak of us ruling over fish, birds, and animals. Ruling responsibly over the creatures God made is the way we exercise our status as God's image. It fulfills our purpose.⁶ Humans are not the only ones told to be fruitful and fill the earth. God tells fish and birds to do so in Genesis 1:22. The command for people to "be fruitful and increase in number" and to "fill the earth" (Genesis 1:28) are creaturely tasks. The image-related task is rulership.⁷

Another clue about what it means to be the image of God comes from Genesis 5. The chapter begins with a recap of God's creation of humans in his "likeness."⁸ Then the narrator applies the same language to the birth of other humans: "Now Adam lived 130 years, he fathered in his likeness, according to his image; and he called his name Seth" (Genesis 5:3, my translation).⁹ The narrator is offering us an analogy: Seth is Adam's image the way we are God's image. To be God's image implies kinship.¹⁰ We are God's family. Being God's image involves both kinship and kingship. We are part of the royal family. Being God's image is our human identity.

One risk in focusing on human identity and vocation is that it could easily contribute to an inflated sense of self-importance. We live in a world saturated by selfies (I confess I snapped several this morning). Self-preoccupation is the norm. Self-discovery is

our obsession. It may even be the reason you picked up this book. Humans first noticed their own nakedness *after* their rebellion against God's rule. Before that, their self-consciousness was less developed. Although the creation account climaxes with the appearance of humans, we are not the center of the universe. God is.

Healthy leaders consider the needs of others and plan well in advance to meet those needs. Our world is riddled with examples of leaders who abuse their power and take what they want. Many of them are too self-absorbed to prioritize the needs of others. In stark contrast, the human rule Genesis envisions is benevolent. We are to prioritize others' flourishing. Did you notice God gives humans and animals the same source of food? Green plants are to be shared (Genesis 1:29-30). To "subdue" the earth is to occupy and cultivate it, but not at the expense of food sources for other land animals.¹¹ We are appointed to "fill the earth and subdue it" (Genesis 1:28) in such a way that all of creation continues to flourish.

In Disney's animated classic, *The Lion King*, King Mufasa introduces his son, Simba, to his future destiny as king.¹² "Look Simba, everything the light touches is our kingdom."

Simba is thrilled: "This will all be *mine*?"

His father explains that the kingdom is not his to exploit but to care for. Simba is confused. "I thought a king can do whatever he wants!"

Mufasa corrects him. "There's more to being king than getting your way all the time. . . . Everything you see exists together in a delicate balance. As king, you need to understand that balance and respect all the creatures, from the crawling ant to the leaping antelope."

While the Creator is missing from *The Lion King*, Mufasa's concept of kingship is otherwise biblical. The rulership God designed for humans is not one that maximizes profit at the expense of sustainability. Values other than profit at any cost must shape our actions. To be human is to participate in creation care on God's behalf. Our task is to care for the earth the way the Creator would. We continue

Being God's image
involves both kinship
and kingship. We are part
of the royal family.

God's creative work.¹³ This important task demands that we focus on something other than ourselves.

CREATION OF HUMANS IN THE *ENUMA ELISH*

In [chapter one](#), we considered the ancient Near Eastern concept of creation as expressed in the epic Babylonian myth *Enuma Elish*.^a Here we return to that epic to note how it portrays the creation of humanity (VI:5-9). According to *Enuma Elish*, the god Marduk created humans out of the blood of the slain god Qingu (VI:29-34), who was killed as a punishment for inciting war with Tiamat. The purpose of humanity was to “bear the gods’ burden that those may rest” (VI:8). Humans were to work so the gods would have less to do. Unlike the God of the Bible, Babylonian gods “rested” during the day and slept at night. From the statement “let them be honored as one but divided in twain,” we learn that humans were one species, but divided into male and female (VI:10). Marduk shepherds humans, the “black-headed folk, his creatures” (VI:107) who “serve him” (VI:113).

One similarity with the biblical account is that humans “serve” the deity (Genesis 2:15). However, the differences are noteworthy:

- The Genesis creation account depicts no conflict between the gods.
- The material world was not made from the bodies of slain deities.
- Humans were not made from the blood of a rebel god but rather from the soil of God’s good creation.
- Their task was to rule over creation and cultivate fruitfulness on God’s behalf for the benefit of all creation rather than engage in manual labor so the gods can eat and sleep.

The Babylonian epic refers to the offspring of the gods as their “image”: the god Anshar “made Anu, his offspring, his equal. Then Anu begot his own image Nudimmud,” Marduk’s father (I:16). The central idea is kinship. As we have seen, the Bible’s concept of “image” includes kinship, too. However, in Genesis ordinary humans, not gods, are endowed with dignity as God’s image. We are considered part of God’s family. Unlike Mesopotamian creation myths that typically saw kings as the image of God, in Scripture that status is shared by every human being, implying that all people represent God.^b

TEAMWORK

With these contrasts in mind, we continue with a close reading of the biblical text. Strikingly, God initiates the act of creating humans in Genesis 1 with the statement, “Let us make humankind as our image, as our likeness” (Genesis 1:26, my translation). God is without peer, yet he says “us.” Some interpreters see this as a reference to the Trinity—because God is three in one, God is able to have a conversation within himself. The concept of God’s interrelation of persons was not clearly revealed until the New Testament, where Jesus is presented as God-made-flesh and included in the divine identity.¹⁴ Even if God had given a sneak preview to the biblical writer, the statement would not likely have signified the Trinity to his original audience.

In an ancient Near Eastern context, the first audience would have heard this as a reference to God’s heavenly court. Only God can create out of nothing, but here God involves the angelic host in his deliberations. This interpretation agrees with numerous Old Testament passages that recognize the existence of a divine council (e.g., Job 1:6-12; Psalm 82; Isaiah 6:8).

No matter which view you find most persuasive, humanity is birthed in community. “Let us,” “our image,” and “our likeness” imply group deliberation. And the result of God’s singular creative work is not a single human but a couple: male and female, both of whom are made as God’s image and both of whom are commissioned to subdue and rule the earth.¹⁵ As Lucy Peppiatt insists, “It is not satisfactory to have a theology of the *imago Dei* that is solely applicable to individuals or to individuals alone in their relation to God without an understanding of what this means for human beings in community.”¹⁶ *Together* we are God’s image. God designed men and women to provide companionship to each other and work side by side in the world.

Why, then, do we call each other “the opposite sex”? We are not opposites but counterparts. We are neighbors, the closest thing we have to ourselves.¹⁷ The point of the narrative is our similarity, not our difference.¹⁸ Summarizing early church father Gregory of Nyssa’s view, Lucy Peppiatt explains, “Neither sex difference nor sexual union is essential to our image-bearing,”¹⁹ concluding that together we carry out God’s work in the world.

While marriage is not a prerequisite to collaborative work, it is one of the many ways we can reflect this reality to the world. My own marriage is an example of this. Over the years we have together discerned God’s calling for our family and

adjusted our roles accordingly. While our children were babies, I stayed at home and handled most of the shopping, cooking, and cleaning while studying part time in seminary. As soon as our kids were in school, I began doctoral studies, and we carved up responsibilities at home in such a way as to ensure that we both had quality time with the kids. These days I teach and write full time as Daniel manages our home while working part time. We're a team.

But—you might say—doesn't God make Eve to be Adam's helper? And doesn't that imply that his career comes first, and her job is to serve him? Not necessarily. The answer to this question comes partway through the second creation account in Genesis. To understand it well, we need to consider the context.

STEWARDS

Genesis 2 is a bit befuddling at first. Creation all over again? We've already witnessed the creation of people in Genesis 1, but in Genesis 2:5 the world still lacks human beings. It also lacks vegetation. God proceeds to create things, but in a different order than in Genesis 1 (man before animals, and animals before woman).

Clearly, these two accounts are not arranged chronologically. Each offers a different angle on God's creative work. In Genesis 1, God is center stage. We witness the power of his word and the wonder of his ordered creation in a well-crafted literary composition. By implication, Genesis 1 offers humans a model work week, including dominion over creation that includes regular rhythms of rest.

Genesis 2 explores what it means to be human in relation to God, to the earth, to plants, to the animals, and to each other. The first humans are unnamed until the end of Genesis 3 because they function as a paradigm for all of us. A close reading of the second account of creation shows us who we are.

As with Genesis 1, Christians are divided over whether these chapters are even attempting to convey history, and that debate is beyond the scope of this book. Whether you are inclined to read Genesis 2–3 as an imaginative “parable” that conveys truth about what it means to be human or as a historical report about the original human pair, we can all agree that these chapters are foundational for Christian anthropology.

When we pay attention to the story as it's told, the first thing we discover is that humans are meant to be gardeners. God created humans to participate in his joy-filled creative work and live in harmony with creation. This is evident from the beginning. Notice that Genesis 2:5 attributes the lack of fruitfulness on the earth to two factors: (1) God had not yet sent rain, and (2) humans were not yet present to till the soil. This statement implies that the intended design is a partnership between God and humans to cultivate the earth.

The absence of a human is resolved by God's creative act. We learn that "Yahweh God formed a human from the soil of the ground" (Genesis 2:7, my translation), an origin we share with animals (see Genesis 2:19). This statement emphasizes humanity's essential connection with the earth. We are human from humus, *adam* from *adamah*, earthling from earth. But we are also more than dirt. God blew his own breath into the human to bring him to life and then invited him to name the animals (Genesis 2:19-20). These acts separate him from inanimate and animate creation, respectively.

The partnership between God and humans hinted at in Genesis 2:5 is fleshed out in the verses that follow. We learn that God is a gardener. He planted the garden in Eden and then passed the baton to humanity (Genesis 2:8). When God placed the first human in Eden's garden, he was "to work it and guard it" (Genesis 2:15, my translation). That is, the human's role was to maintain and protect God's garden.²⁰ The first instruction God gave the human was permission to enjoy its fruit.

When we retell this story, we tend to focus on the fruit that the humans were not allowed to eat, but God allows them to eat freely from every other tree. The garden is a place of abundance, good work, and rest. What would it look like to return to the joy of cultivation and stewardship? To celebrate the first ripe tomato? To inhale the sweet scent of fresh peaches? To share produce freely with the animals God made? From the beginning, our human vocation had to do with the cultivation and care of creation, making the rest of the earth like Eden. We neglect it to our own peril, and that of our children.

THE CHRISTIAN AND THE ENVIRONMENT

Now that I've seen how central environmental stewardship is to human vocation, I'm puzzled by the antagonistic relationship between the Christian community of my childhood and the environmental cause. If environmental stewardship is a key way in which we are to live out our identity as God's image, then our vote and our behavior ought to take creation care into consideration. As we are able, we can influence the institutions in which we participate by helping them to use more environmentally sustainable practices. As consumers we can also pressure individual corporations to make needed changes in their supply chains and processes, refusing to buy products unless their clean production and distribution are guaranteed.

Some Christians will insist that we need to prioritize gospel issues instead. However, creation care is central to God's design for humanity in Genesis 1 and 2. It's the way God designed for us to live out our identities as members of his royal family. Sandra Richter points out that environmental degradation disproportionately affects vulnerable communities.^a We are to steward the creation as a royal family, considering others' well-being in addition to our own. In later chapters, we'll explore how creation will continue to matter for eternity. The energy we expend on environmental issues is not wasted energy. It's consistent with gospel proclamation.

The opposite is also true. Human sin affects the planet in disastrous ways. We'll explore this further in [chapter four](#).

CREATION, TAKE TWO

The second creation account focuses on human identity and vocation. We share essential characteristics with the created world, but we also breathe the very breath of God and share in his work of creative stewardship. With this purpose in mind, we can revisit the question of the relationship between the first man and the first woman. First, God makes the man (Genesis 2:7). Then, God gives him a job to do, cultivating and caring for the garden, and provides food, followed by a command not to eat from a certain tree (Genesis 2:15-17). Immediately, God concludes that the man should not be alone. He lacks a partner to fulfill his duties and someone to help him do what is right. In other words, he needs a partner in work and in worship.

God makes space for human agency by giving the man a meaningful task, inviting him to name the animals.²¹ The parade of animals that God brings him only

exacerbates the sense that he stands apart from all of them: he's alone. If the man's need was for someone to carry his burdens, he could have chosen a horse or a mule. What he needed was a companion. God's creation of woman from man's own flesh indicates their essential similarity and equal status before God. Unlike the animals, she is his counterpart. She comes from his own body (as every future man will come from the body of a woman), which suggests their mysterious connection. She "corresponds to him" (Hebrew *kenegdo*, Genesis 2:18, 20). Kinship is later implied by the expression "my bone and my flesh."²²

Why, then, does God call her the man's "helper"? Because the man cannot fulfill his purpose alone. He lacks. He needs her. Humans are made for community. The rest of the Old Testament will use the same word "helper" (*'ezer* in Hebrew) in two main ways: (1) to refer to allied soldiers who assist in battle (see, for example, Joshua 1:14; 1 Chronicles 12:1-22), and (2) to refer to God

God's creation of woman from man's own flesh indicates their essential similarity and equal status before God. Unlike the animals, she is his counterpart.

as Israel's helper (see, for example, Genesis 49:25; 2 Chronicles 32:8; Psalm 10:14; Isaiah 41:10-14). Clearly, in those passages, the "helper" does not have a subservient role. If anything, it is the opposite. God supplies what Israel lacks. In fact, the word *'ezer* occurs as a common noun over ninety times in the Old Testament but never refers to what servants or subordinates do for their masters. *'Ezer* is primarily used in military contexts and is best translated "ally."

The first man, placed in the garden and given a task and a command, needed an ally to help him fulfill these directives—someone more like him than the animals. God made woman to fill this role. Why would we read subservience into Genesis 2:18? Perhaps we rush ahead to the disastrous consequences of human rebellion in Genesis 3, supposing that those consequences illustrate God's intended design. But God didn't desire thorns, thistles, and domination of the woman any more than expectant parents carefully design a time-out corner for their children before they are born.

Before Adam and Eve rebel against God, no hierarchy separates them.²³ Both male and female are God's image (Genesis 1:27). Neither one rules the other. God's

plan is for us to work as partners. Both are to rule creation. Both sexes are required to produce offspring (Genesis 1:28).²⁴

However, although most humans will participate in procreation, doing so is not essential to personhood or to our status as God's image. Peter Gentry and Stephen Wellum point out a chiasm, or literary sandwich, in Genesis 1:27-28.

- (A) in the image of God he created him
- (B) male and female he created them
- (B') be fruitful and increase in number and fill the earth
- (A') and subdue it and rule over fish/birds/animals²⁵

While our sexual differentiation is the necessary condition for fruitfulness, enabling us to increase in number (the *B* elements), our status as God's image is expressed in subduing and ruling (the *A* elements). The paired elements of this literary sandwich imply that our identity as God's image is expressed as we rule creation on God's behalf—an identity that does not require childbearing. Since Genesis 1:22 also commissions animals to reproduce, procreation cannot be the basis for our status as God's image.²⁶

That the phrase “male and female” is parallel to “image of God” highlights the inclusivity of human status as God's image rather than the particular content of the image.²⁷ The text does not say, “God created them male and female so they could be his image,” in which case our biological sex would be a necessary aspect of our ability to function as God's image. Rather, the text insists that the image status extends to all humans regardless of our sexed embodiment. The point is that our sex, gender, marital status, and parental status are not essential components of our identity as God's image. By the end of the biblical story, we will meet many men and women who were engaged in God's work in the world without being married—Paul and Jesus chief among them. The prophet Anna also appears to have been childless (Luke 2:36-37), and the Ethiopian eunuch was gladly welcomed into the faith community (Acts 8:26-39).

Genesis 1 is not designed to answer every question posed today about sex and gender. But it's important to remember that God's deliberations were plural (“Let us make . . .”), and the results were plural (“male and female”). The point, then, is that

no person is excluded from this status as God's image, and no one person can fulfill the associated tasks on their own. None of us has to do it all. To fulfill God's commission, we need each other.

KEY IDEAS

- The *imago Dei* is concrete. Like a statue that represents a king or a deity, so humans represent Yahweh to creation. Being God's image is our human identity.
- Being God's image indicates both kinship and kingship. Humans are part of God's royal family.
- This identity expresses itself in responsible rulership over creation, including environmental stewardship and supportive collaboration with other humans.
- Sex neither qualifies nor disqualifies us from being God's image. All humans are the image of God.

DIGGING DEEPER

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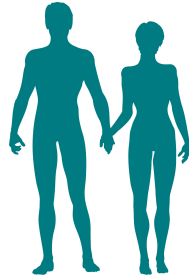
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GETTING TO WORK



SHOE LEATHER

Theology has consequences. The way we read these early chapters of Genesis shapes the way we live. Our sense of identity expresses itself in what we do. So, in this chapter let's put some shoe leather on these ideas about human vocation.

For those who have steadily worked since high school, it may be hard to view work as a privilege. When Monday morning rolls around, it can feel more like a burden. But ask anyone who has been unemployed or underemployed for more than a month. They will tell you how demoralizing it can be. God wired us to find satisfaction in our work.

After college, Daniel and I moved to the Philippines as missionaries. Getting there involved a ton of training, reading, purging, packing, selling, and praying. It's not cheap to move a family overseas. God formed a tremendous team to cover us in prayer and support us financially. Our mission was to participate in outreach to a minority language group in the Philippines, but our first task was to learn Tagalog, the national language. After months of language study, we were ready to get to work. But we had a problem.

Daniel had been brought on as team administrator. His job was to handle logistics for our team (finances, government paperwork, travel arrangements, manuals and procedures, etc.) so that our teammates could focus their attention on

outreach. Our team was small, consisting of four families. The others had already been there a long time. The idea was that if we had a team administrator, then our team could recruit more missionaries to join us. But just as Daniel started his work, we got word from our international headquarters that it was time for Westerners to begin turning the work over to Filipinos. Our team was going to phase out.

We were devastated. We had gone through so much work to get there and expended so much effort to learn Tagalog. But if our mission did not want to send us more missionaries, then how could we stay? Daniel could fulfill all his current responsibilities in a day or two each month. For the rest of the month, he felt useless.

We tried diligently to find work for him. He offered his services in finance or administration to other mission agencies. No one needed his help. I watched helplessly as Daniel began to slide into depression. God wired us to actively participate in his work in the world. When we are prevented from doing so, it's demoralizing.

Mary McDermott Shideler boldly claims,

To be a person is to act, to work. In working we become our true selves and know ourselves and each other truly. Therefore work which is essentially trivial or shoddy, or consists of making things that are not worth making at all, diminishes the persons who engage in it at every level of production, exchange, and use.¹

Doing good work is one way to express our purpose.

The Israelite laws recognize this human drive to work. Leviticus 19:9-10 asks farmers not to reap their entire harvest but to leave the grain along the edges for the poor and the foreigner to reap. Fields are to remain fallow every seventh year so that those without land of their own (including animals!) can harvest what grows by itself (Leviticus 25:2-7). This is not a handout. It ensures that even the most vulnerable members of society can work for a living.

Even the so-called slavery laws in Exodus 21:2-7 presume that indentured servitude offers a better solution to poverty than charity by itself. Those who can no longer manage their debts may join another household long term to work their way out of debt. The Israelites had no debtor's prisons. Instead, they preserved the dignity of those who had fallen on hard times by offering them work.

For most of us, watching Netflix or playing video games or scrolling through social media does not count as work. Neither does watching basketball or going on vacation. Perhaps one reason so many North Americans feel a sense of angst about life is that many of us go through periods of

aimlessness. We're not fulfilling our vocation. Look around you. How are things in your corner of the world? Are you reflecting the Creator's desire to bring order that promotes the flourishing of creation? Most of the time our fulfillment of that task is not flashy—washing the dishes and folding the laundry do not win awards and are not Instagram-worthy, but when we are diligent to bring order to our corner of the world, those around us have space in which to flourish.

When we are diligent to bring order to our corner of the world, those around us have space in which to flourish.

God has given us good work to do, and that work brings satisfaction, but ultimately our value is not tied to what we can produce. Our work does not define us, and it should not consume us. Sabbath rhythms remind us to rest in God's provision and guard against obsession with work.

The climax of Genesis 1 is God's blessing on the humans he created. Our identity as God's image connects us to him by virtue of our being made like him in some way. If we take seriously the Bible's claim that God created us, then our human identity is firmly linked with our Creator. We are who we are because of who God is and who God intended us to be. We cannot accurately define ourselves without reference to God.

Being God's image also connects us to each other because both men and women share this status. No one person can fulfill God's purposes alone—we need each other. Our identity is defined in community. The task of dominion belongs to the entire species.

Being God's image also connects us to the rest of creation. We are defined in relation to other creatures, and our sustenance depends on God's provision of plants and trees that bear fruit (Genesis 1:29-30). As Douglas and Jonathan Moo put it, "The image of God means being placed into a particular set of relationships with God, each other, and the rest of creation, for the purpose of ruling as his royal representatives."²

As we saw in the previous chapter, unlike the creation accounts from other nations, the Bible presents being human as a privilege. Doing the work to which God has called us (and neither more nor less than that) is a blessing!

GENDER AND MINISTRY ROLES

One time I heard Esau McCaulley speak about how Christians choose a single verse that becomes the lens through which they view everything else. He called it a “Lord of the Rings approach,” with “one ring to rule them all.” His point was that a single passage cannot possibly capture the depth of the Bible’s teaching on any topic. The Lord of the Rings approach is especially common with regard to women in ministry. Paul made a few statements that seem to restrict what women can do in public ministry. These few verses have become the battleground of tense conversations arguing over what women can and can’t do.

The problem with this approach is twofold: First, Paul was writing to particular congregations embedded in a cultural context that is foreign to us, seeking to address problems in those contexts. Second, those who focus narrowly on these prohibitions often underappreciate Paul’s consistent commendation of female coworkers in ministry (e.g., Romans 16) and ignore the rest of the Bible’s teaching on women.

Genesis 1–2 is an excellent place to begin taking a closer look at this issue. What emerges from these foundational chapters is the Bible’s clear insistence that women stand side by side with men as the crown of creation. Women are God’s image, sharing equal dignity and bearing equal responsibility for representing God to creation. Nothing indicates that the tasks associated with being God’s image pertain primarily to men. In fact, since filling the earth is part of God’s intention for the human race, men simply can’t do it on their own.

Genesis 2 highlights the incompleteness of the man’s attempt to fulfill his human purpose on his own. Man’s solitary state is the first thing described as “not good” in creation (Genesis 2:18). Man needs a companion equal to him with whom he can share responsibility. He needs a woman. I find it interesting that man’s lack of companionship is first noted immediately after God gives him a command. The implication is that we need each other to walk faithfully with God. While we are not responsible for each other’s sin, healthy companionship can make a positive impact.

Things don’t go well in the garden, but the partnership God intended for humans from the beginning was clearly meant to encourage greater faithfulness. Whatever you conclude, then, about Paul’s teaching on women’s roles in ministry, I hope you’ll remember the teaching of Genesis 1–2 on women’s dignity and responsibility for carrying out kingdom work. Partnership between men and women is an essential part of what it means to be human.

KNOWING BETTER

Theology matters. It's the engine for how we live. What we believe about who God is, who we are, and why we are here drives the way we interact with the world. If I truly believe that every human being is the image of God, created to signal the presence of God to the world, this belief ought to compel me to treat my fellow humans with dignity. If I believe

Women are God's image,
sharing equal dignity
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that our status or identity as God's image is best expressed when we work together, then I will prioritize partnership. Your contribution to the world will matter to me, and I will not withhold my own contribution. If I believe that God created men and women to work alongside each other to cultivate and protect the earth, then I will be more likely to see men as collaborators and less likely to see them as rivals. I will care more about the way my actions impact the natural world.

If I believe that when Eve and Adam sinned, the image was lost, damaged, or destroyed, then I may not recognize the dignity of my neighbor. Theology mattered in the garden, just as it matters now. The man and the woman had the opportunity to know God directly. Their responses to God reveal what they believed to be true about him.

When the serpent approached the woman in Eden's garden to tempt her, we're told that he was "crafty." The Hebrew word for "crafty" (*'arum*) sounds like the word for "naked" (*'erom*). Immediately preceding the serpent's entrance we learn, "Now the two of them were naked, the human and his wife, but they were not ashamed" (Genesis 2:25, my translation). The humans were comfortable in their own skin. They had no reason to hide from God or from each other. But all that was about to change. The serpent's opening question cast doubt on the goodness of God.

"Did God really say that y'all may not eat from every tree of the garden?" (Genesis 3:1, my translation. I'm slipping into my southern drawl here so that y'all can track with the plural pronouns.)

His pronoun was plural, recognizing that the command God gave the man in Genesis 2 was intended for both humans. What God said is that they could eat from any tree but one. God had generously provided all they could possibly need. But the serpent framed the gift negatively—God had not allowed them to eat anything they wanted to eat. The woman was trapped. The serpent was technically correct, but his

question failed to consider the character of God. He painted God as a cosmic killjoy who was holding out on them rather than as a generous benefactor.

In her response, the woman pointed first to what *was* allowed before mentioning the forbidden tree. However, she extends God's command to say that even touching the tree is off limits.

The serpent becomes even bolder in its response, now directly contradicting the divine command: "Y'all will not surely die" (Genesis 3:4, my translation). Then he brazenly suggests that God is holding out on them: "For God knows that on the day y'all eat from it that y'all's eyes will be opened and y'all will become like God, the one who knows good and bad" (Genesis 3:5, my translation).

Becoming like God appeals to the woman. After all, humans were made in his image, to be like him. We are kin. The serpent's proposal feels enough like God's design to draw her in. However, the *imago Dei* was meant to rule on God's behalf, a task that required allegiance to God's rule and trust that his way is best.

Counter to every artistic depiction of this event that I have seen, their conversation does not appear to be happening at the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. The woman describes the tree as being "in the middle of the garden" (Genesis 3:3). If she'd been standing under its shade, she could have simply said "this tree." This suggests that the serpent was planting a seed of doubt in her that draws her back to the tree to reconsider. When that happens, she is not alone. Her husband is by her side. Though the man is silent throughout this scene, we learn in Genesis 3:6 that he is present. She eats first. Perhaps when the man sees that she does not immediately die, he is persuaded to eat as well. Together they defy God's command, foolishly reaching for what is forbidden.

Again, the serpent is partly right. Disobeying God does open their eyes. But what they see embarrasses them. They become instantly aware of their nakedness—they *know* they are naked. This is not the knowledge they anticipated. They respond by covering their bodies (Genesis 3:7). When God engages them in conversation, the first humans initiate "the blame game." The man blames his wife (and casts shade on God, who gave him the woman), and the woman blames the serpent for tricking her.

Their disobedience to divine command and failure to trust God's good intentions immediately fractures their relationship with God, with each other, and with the world God made. Our spiritual lives are embodied. Humans are meant to be

whole—our bodies are the canvas upon which we convey our sense of self to each other and the means by which we interact.³ The first humans eat forbidden fruit (a physical act), feel shame, and cover their bodies. God physically removes them from the garden paradise to prevent them from eating from the tree of life (apparently to ensure that they would not live forever in this fractured state).

Their disobedience to divine command and failure to trust God's good intentions immediately fractures their relationship with God, with each other, and with the world God made.

The first humans wanted to put themselves on par with God. Their quest to know more resulted in their own diminishment. This is always the result when humans reject the divine command, failing to trust the goodness of God. The losses were, and are, incalculable.

WHAT WE LOST

The first humans lost mutual trust, mutual respect, innocence, and intimacy with God and each other. Worst of all, they lost access to the presence of God in the garden. This is illustrated in their encounter with God following their rebellion. They hide. God seeks: “Where are you?” The man replies from his hiding place: “I heard you in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked; so I hid” (Genesis 3:9-10).

This disposition toward God represents a huge loss—the loss of mutual trust. When we have something to hide, God's presence becomes a threat rather than a comfort. As a child, I remember waiting with great anticipation for my dad to arrive home after work. My brother and I would take turns watching out the front window, and as soon as we caught sight of his truck we'd squeal: “Daddy's home!” When he entered the house, we'd bury our faces in his chest, inhaling the scent of sawdust mixed with sweat while we gave him a great big hug.

However, if either my brother or I had been naughty while Daddy was at work, then we'd hear a threat from Mom: “Just wait until your dad gets home!” This was the most ominous threat we could receive. If we gave Mom trouble, then Dad's first

job when he arrived home would be to discipline us. When we disobeyed, we experienced his displeasure. On those days, we might be inclined to hide from fear rather than for fun, solely because of our own disobedience.

The first humans' hiding was a gut reaction to their rebellion. In eating the forbidden fruit, they had lost so much. But had they lost their identity as God's image? We need to think carefully about the effect of human rebellion on the image. Many pastors, scholars, and regular Bible readers have assumed that the image is lost or severely damaged in Genesis 3. But if our status can be lost, then so can human dignity and our essential relation to God.

No, God bestows dignity on humans that does not depend on ability and is not lost due to sin.⁴ John Kilner is a Christian ethicist who has studied this concept deeply. Like many other professors and pastors, he used to regularly talk about how the image of God was destroyed, lost, or distorted when Adam and Eve fell. But when he studied the concept more closely, he realized that the Bible never teaches that the image is lost or damaged. If we understand the image as a certain human attribute or capability, then we can look at people who are not performing well or who were born with limitations and conclude that they are less than human. That approach is deeply problematic. Kilner explains, "Once people accepted the idea of a corruptible image, the idea of humanity's original creation in God's image was no longer sufficient to uphold human dignity. Sin could considerably weaken that image, and thus the protection it afforded."⁵

Identity is a modern concept, but a useful one for talking about the image of God. We can no more lose our identity as God's image than a child can lose his or her identity as a son or a daughter. If one of my children decides to rebel, rejecting my counsel and defying the boundaries I have set, that child is still my child. Nothing can change that. We can become estranged from one another, but we remain mother and child. Our identity as God's image is like this. We can fail to live well as God's image, but we never stop being God's image. Because the essence of being God's image is a claim about our identity rather than a capability or function, we cannot lose it.

Here's one of the most persuasive factors that leads me to conclude that the image of God is not lost: human status as God's image is reiterated after the fall (Genesis 5:1-3) and again after the flood (Genesis 9:6). To me this is all the evidence we need to demonstrate that human identity has not changed.⁶ Our

relationship with God may be strained or broken, but humans remain the image of God.

Nicholas Wolterstorff insists that human dignity is grounded not in capacity but in the simple fact that we are loved by God. “If God loves . . . each and every human being equally and permanently, then natural human rights inhere in the worth bestowed on human beings by that love.”⁷ We’ll revisit this idea later.

Because the essence of being God’s image is a claim about our identity rather than a capability or function, we cannot lose it.

Still, human rebellion fundamentally altered relationships.

The woman’s relationship with creation is marked by hostility. Her ability to follow her calling to fill and subdue the earth is marked by pain—distress in conception and pain in childbirth.⁸ Her partnership with her husband is fractured so that her longing for his support is met instead with his domination, impeding their ability to partner to do God’s work (Genesis 3:16). For the first time, a human will rule another human.

Likewise, the man’s ability to produce food will be marked by the pain of thorns and thistles, and he will be faced with his own mortality. Daily he will work the ground he came from and to which he will return when he dies. We have not lost our identity as God’s image, but as Richard Middleton explains, “Sin has distorted human life, and with it our ability to manifest God’s presence in the cosmic temple.”⁹ Our fractured relationships with God, each other, and the earth cripple our vocational effectiveness and diminish the glory we reflect to the world.

WHAT WE KEEP LOSING

The tragedy of Adam and Eve’s failure does not die with them. Their children carry on this legacy, and their conflict becomes a paradigm of every human conflict. Their son Abel’s offering was superior because he brought God his best (“fat portions from some of the firstborn of his flock”) while his brother Cain simply brought “some” of his produce (Genesis 4:3-4). When God clearly favored Abel, Cain had a choice: repent or rebel? As Miroslav Volf explains, “Cain was confronted with God’s measure of what truly matters and what is truly great. Since he could not

change the measure and refused to change himself, he excluded both God and Abel from his life.”¹⁰ Cain cut himself off from God, his community, and his brother by murdering him. Hostility reigned. Like his parents, Cain experienced the ecological implications of sin and became a restless wanderer. Violence between people stains the ground and results in a lack of fruitfulness. The ground cried out at Abel’s death (Genesis 4:10-12). Things were not as they should have been.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a German pastor who resisted the Nazi regime during World War II. He reflected on the implications of recognizing others as people made in the image of God—something Cain failed to do. He recommends that we refuse to speak aloud any judgments we feel toward other people.¹¹ When we exercise this restraint, we will be less likely to treat them violently. Bonhoeffer muses,

God did not make this person as I would have made him. He did not give him to me as a brother for me to dominate and control, but in order that I might find above him the Creator. Now the other person, in the freedom with which he was created, becomes the occasion of joy, whereas before he was only a nuisance and an affliction. God does not will that I should fashion the other person according to the image that seems good to me, that is, in my own image; rather in his very freedom from me God made this person in His image.¹²

To recognize that others are created as God’s image should compel us to treat them with dignity.

A brief survey easily demonstrates that human greed and exploitation continue to violate the beauty of our world. Wars are devastating, but they are not the only factor contributing to environmental degradation. In a hurry to profit, humans take what they want without thinking about sustainability. Earth’s poorest communities suffer the most because they lack the protections of those with power. Have you ever seen a strip-mining project adjacent to a high-class neighborhood? No, society exports its messiest and most dangerous projects, digging where those in power don’t have to look at the mess.¹³

Season three of the Netflix series *The Crown* introduced me to the 1966 mining accident of Aberfan, Wales. In addition to the adults who were buried alive when the entire mountain collapsed, 116 children lost their lives.¹⁴ The mining operation had deposited debris perilously close to the town atop underground springs. The

community's cries for better safety measures were ignored. After heavy rains, the entire "tip" (a hill of mining waste over 100 feet tall), collapsed, sending a thirty-foot wave of sludge into the town, engulfing a primary school and many homes. This disaster takes its place alongside all the other examples of dangerous jobs in which greedy owners cut corners on safety, and consequently dozens lose their lives. All creation groans under the weight of human violence, but the most vulnerable bear the brunt of human exploitation.

The world's poorest communities suffer disproportionately from the effects of environmental degradation. Although some aspects of international trade are now better regulated than they used to be, we continue to export our waste and our most destructive industries to other countries, some of which lack adequate regulations to protect the environment, local populations, and sources of food.¹⁵ God is on the side of the poor. He consistently calls the wealthy to take responsibility to protect the vulnerable.¹⁶ If you're reading this book, then you are among those who bear some responsibility. Every human being, regardless of income or class, is the image of God, possessing inherent dignity. Our job is to ensure the flourishing of those around us.

The implications of our failure to do this are disastrous not only to the environment but in so many other ways. Our society is plagued by disregard for those who (for one reason or another) don't fit the profile of the "ideal human specimen": children, those not yet born, the elderly, those with disabilities or chronic illnesses, those of other races or ethnicities, women, and those with other gender identities.

If we took seriously the Bible's teaching that every human being is God's image, it would radically reshape the way we think about and interact with others. The doctrine of the *imago Dei* needs shoe leather.

KEY IDEAS

- Working is one way we participate with God in ruling creation. Work does not define us but brings a measure of satisfaction.
- Men and women share equally in the status of the *imago Dei* as well as its attendant responsibilities.

- Human rebellion at its root is a failure to trust God’s good intentions and follow his command. Nevertheless, our identity as God’s image cannot be lost.
- The doctrine of the *imago Dei* should transform the way we engage with every other human being, regardless of age, race, class, marital status, or ability. All are to be treated with dignity.

DIGGING DEEPER

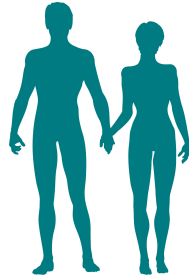
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THE HUMAN PROJECT



GROUNDING

East of Eden, life is ruthless. The human project continues and expands amid strife. Cain finds a wife and has children. He builds a city. His great-great-great grandson Lamech dominates his home, takes multiple wives, and brags about violent vengeance that is out of proportion to the crime against him (Genesis 4:19-24). He twists the story of his ancestor Cain, finding justification for murder. The narrator does not hold Lamech up as an example of someone who fulfills God's purpose for creation. Quite the opposite. His story illustrates how quickly things ran amok.

Yet, we also get glimmers of hope. God granted Adam and Eve another son, Seth, in the wake of their grief over Abel. And by the time their grandsons were born, "people began to call on the name of the LORD" (Genesis 4:26). Not everyone was swept up into violence.

Genesis 5 chronicles the family line of Seth, highlighting one man in particular: Enoch. Genealogies are not usually our go-to for inspiration, but if we're patient with them, they yield great insights. In this case, the pattern of the genealogy is broken. Instead of telling us how many years Enoch lived, we're told how long he "walked faithfully with God" (Genesis 5:22). Enoch's life was characterized by much more than survival. He was an example of faithfulness in his generation. He was grounded. So remarkable was his life that rather than receiving a death report,

we're told, "then he was no more, because God took him away" (Genesis 5:24).¹ Enoch modeled a different way to be human.

As we continue our trek through the early chapters of Genesis in search of clues about what it means to be human, we come to an odd story. Many cultures pass down myths about humans with extraordinary power who carry within them the blood of the gods.² The Bible is no exception. Genesis 6 preserves an intriguing story about a time when the "sons of God" couldn't keep their eyes off the beautiful "daughters of humans" (Genesis 6:2). They repeated the sin of the first humans by seeing and taking what was off limits to them. The story is brief and mysterious, leaving many questions unanswered.

Who were these "sons of God"? Were they fallen angels? If not, why were these unions problematic? Were the Nephilim their offspring, or did they simply live at the same time (see Genesis 6:4)? Were the children of these illicit unions immortal?

Opinions cluster around three main theories about the identity of the "sons of God" in this story: (1) They could be humans from a royal family who marry common women, or who exercise the "right of the first night" by sleeping with each new bride before she is given to her groom.³ (2) Alternatively, they could be offspring of the godly line of Seth, who carried on the image of God, in contrast to the "daughters of humans" from the line of Cain, who did not.⁴ (3) Finally, they could be residents of the spiritual realm, such as angels, who have sexual relations with human women. The same expression "sons of God" describes angels in Job 1:6 and 2:1 (see also 2 Peter 2:9-11 and Jude 8-10).⁵

Throughout history, most cultures have told myths involving boundary-crossing romance, such as between the living and the dead, between humans and spiritual beings, or between commoners and royalty. I posted a simple request on social media for TV shows and movies that fit this genre. It quickly generated a list of over eighty examples!⁶ Perhaps for this reason you find it difficult to see Genesis 6 as problematic.

The bottom line is order. As I explained in [chapter one](#), Genesis 1 depicts creation as a process of bringing disorder into order. God arranges the proper domains of every living thing so that each can flourish and be fruitful. Genesis 6 represents a willful breakdown in the order God established.

No matter which explanation you find most plausible, the "sons of God" crossed a boundary. As a result God placed tighter limits on the human lifespan and

even regretted making humans. This downward spiral into wickedness prompted God to start fresh.

Old Testament scholar Michael Heiser is best known for his work on this passage. With the help of other ancient texts, Heiser concludes that rebellious angels mated with human women to produce giants.⁷ On his reading, the story functions as a bold critique of Babylonian culture, which bragged about its descent from “giant, quasi-divine” beings. As Heiser explains,

The biblical writers took what Babylonians thought was proof of their own divine heritage and told a different story. Yes, there were giants, renowned men, both before and after the flood (Gen 6:4). But those offspring and their knowledge were not of the true God—they were the result of rebellion against Yahweh by lesser divine beings.⁸

How does this story help us answer the question of what it means to be human? To be human is to know our place in the created order. God has appointed both humans and angels to rule over our respective domains (see Deuteronomy 32:8). Human and angelic rebellions disrupted God’s good order in creation and spread sin rather than faithfully representing God’s rule.⁹ Sin does not erase our identity as the *imago Dei*, but it prevents us from fully reflecting God’s glory. When we reach outside our domain and try to usurp what belongs only to God, we’re in big trouble. In this case, giant trouble!

To be human is to know
our place in the created
order.

THE “FALL” OF SATAN

The Bible tells us little to nothing about the origins of the one we call Satan in Christian tradition. If we limit ourselves to the Old Testament, we have almost no explicit information.

Genesis never identifies the serpent in the garden as Satan. (Go ahead and reread Genesis 3! I'll wait.) Neither do modern Jewish interpreters. However, in the ancient Near East, serpents were sometimes thought to be angelic guardians of sacred space, so its presence in this story would not have seemed out of place to ancient readers. If this is the case, how did this one go rogue? John's vision in Revelation 12 clearly associates Satan with the serpent, picturing him as a dragon on the verge of defeat. But this doesn't help us figure out his origin.^a

The figure opposing Job in the divine council is not identified by name. He is simply called “the accuser” (*hasatan* in Hebrew). *Satan* cannot be a proper name here because in Hebrew it has “the” attached to the front of it. He's presented as an angelic being (one of the many “sons of God” or “angels”) who tested the integrity of Job's devotion (Job 1:6-7).

The passages most commonly cited as evidence of the fall of Satan are Isaiah 14:12-20 and Ezekiel 28:1-19. However, when read in context, each of these condemns a human king for his pride. It is possible that the fall of these human kings mirrors the fall of Satan, such that the fall of Satan provides an analogy for the human king.^b Each aspires to a greatness beyond what was appropriate. If so, these prophetic passages allude to an ancient story that was not preserved for us explicitly in Scripture.

In my view the clearest evidence for an angelic rebellion is Genesis 6. If the “sons of God” are angels, then the figure later known as Satan could have been among them or even leading them. However, if that's the case, this part of the “fall” occurs after the first humans ate the forbidden fruit. Clearly, the Bible leaves many of our questions about the origins of evil unanswered.

The New Testament presents a clearer picture of Satan as a tempter, as “a liar and the father of lies” (John 8:44), “prince of this world” (John 12:31), “ruler of the kingdom of the air” (Ephesians 2:2), and “the devil” (Ephesians 6:11). The Bible clearly teaches the existence of such a rebellious angelic being. However, I would caution against constructing a detailed theology of Satan since the Bible is silent regarding many of the questions we have about him.

STARTING OVER

How does God respond when humans cross the line?

I gave birth to our firstborn after graduating from Bible college. We decorated her room with Noah's ark packed with colorful animals on a deep blue sea. At the time, I was excited to find Bible-themed decor for our baby's room. In retrospect, it was an odd choice. Why surround our newborn with scenes from the most sweeping act of God's judgment in human history? True, the ark represented God's redemptive mercy since he rescued animals and Noah's family from drowning, but every other human and animal life were destroyed. Historically speaking, it was a moment that called for lament. Its suitability for a baby's room is questionable.

Noah's father was named after Lamech, a shady namesake (Genesis 5:28; 4:19-24). But this second Lamech was different. He longed for comfort from the consequences of human rebellion. He named his son Noah ("rest" or "comfort") in hopes of relief (Genesis 5:29). However, instead of comfort, Noah witnessed God's decisive judgment on human wickedness. Enough was enough.

We've already briefly considered the ways that human violence pollutes the earth itself in the Cain and Abel story. The flood story implies that such pollution had reached the point of no return. God decided to start over with a clean slate. Genesis 6–9 describes the un-creation of the earth, as water above the skies collapses to flood the earth and the seas cover the dry land. Genesis 1 is undone.

The entire story of the flood is expertly crafted as a giant chiasm, or literary sandwich. The second half of the story mirrors the first (See diagram on next page).¹⁰ The ebb and flow of this literary design matches the rising and receding of the waters. The end result is a recreated world, repopulated with animals, and a new garden tended by Noah, who takes Adam's place as the "first man." At the center of the literary sandwich is the statement, "But God remembered Noah and all the wild animals and the livestock that were with him in the ark, and he sent a wind over the earth, and the waters receded" (Genesis 8:1). In the first creation account, the wind or Spirit of God hovered over the waters. Here it passes over the land again so that it becomes habitable. God did not get so carried away with un-creation that he forgot the man whose obedience facilitated divine rescue. Rather, he acted on the basis of his prior promise.

A Noah (6:9)

B Shem, Ham, and Japheth (6:9)

- C Ark to be built (6:11-16)
 - D Announcement of flood (6:17)
 - E Covenant with Noah (6:18)
 - F Food in the ark (6:21)
 - G Command to enter ark (7:1)
 - H Waiting seven days for rain (7:4)
 - I Waiting seven days for floodwaters (7:10)
 - J Birds enter the ark (7:13)
 - K God shuts the ark (7:16)
 - L Forty days of flooding (7:17)
 - M Waters increase (7:18)
 - N Ark floats above the mountains (7:18-19)
 - O 150 days of flooding (7:24)
 - P God remembers Noah and the animals (8:1)
 - O' 150 days of receding floods (8:3)
 - N' Ark rests on a mountain (8:3-4)
 - M' Waters recede (8:5)
 - L' Forty days of flood receding (8:6)
 - K' Noah opens the ark (8:6)
 - J' Birds leave the ark (8:6-9)
 - I' Waiting seven days for flood to subside (8:10)
 - H' Waiting seven days for dry land (8:12)
 - G' Command to leave ark (8:15)
 - F' Food outside the ark (9:3)
 - E' Covenant with Noah (9:8-15)
 - D' Announcement of no floods (9:15)
 - C' Leaving the ark (9:18)
 - B' Shem, Ham, and Japheth (9:18)
 - A' Noah (9:19)

The narrator offers a glowing review of Noah's character before the flood. He was "a righteous man, blameless among the people of his time, and he walked faithfully with God" (Genesis 6:9). Noah's blamelessness contrasts with the "great wickedness of the human race" (Genesis 6:5) surrounding him. This contrast

explains why “Noah found favor in the eyes of the LORD” (Genesis 6:8). His faithfulness to God was noteworthy in his generation, like Enoch’s and Abel’s before him.

However, after the flood the garden scene tempers our optimism for the future. There, Noah gets drunk and naked and is shamed by his son, resulting in serious breakdown between parent and child (Genesis 9:20-24). Clearly, the flood has not fixed humanity. Starting over with a new world as a clean slate does not solve the problem of human rebellion and the fractured relationships that result. We see sin in the garden once again.

Against this bleak backdrop God blesses Noah, reiterating the purpose of humanity. The fall and the flood do not diminish human dignity. On the contrary, *humanity retains its identity as God’s image* in spite of rebellion and punishment. God’s blessing is also intact:

Humanity retains its identity as God’s image in spite of rebellion and punishment.

“Be fruitful and increase in number and fill the earth” (Genesis 9:1). Interestingly, this time God does not tell them to “subdue” the earth (see Genesis 1:28). *Kabash* (“subdue”) is a strong word, implying that the use of force might be needed. The tendency toward violence corrupted the fulfillment of this aspect of human vocation. So God introduces two innovations: fear and food. God causes the animals to fear humanity so that the order of human society is easier to maintain without the exercise of violence. And God gives animals as food for people. Previously, God only specified green plants for food. Now, humans may eat meat (Genesis 9:3). (Some of you are celebrating!)

To allow meat eating could introduce its own problems so God puts up two guardrails to curb violence between animals and humans. First, animal blood is off-limits for human consumption. The life of an animal must be honored by letting its blood drain into the ground. Second, human life is off limits for both animals and fellow humans. God holds wild animals accountable for killing humans, and God holds humans accountable for murdering each other (Genesis 9:4-5). He gives humans the responsibility to punish murderers: “Whoever sheds human blood, by humans shall their blood be shed” (Genesis 9:6). This check on human violence is explicitly grounded in human identity as the image of God: “for the image of God has God made humankind” (Genesis 9:6, my translation).

Corruption and violence prompted the flood in the first place (Genesis 6:11). On the recreated earth, God emphasizes the essential dignity of humanity while reiterating our identity as his image. This identity is the basis for treating each other well. Life is messy, but all has not been lost.

CALLING THE SHOTS

Not every idea is a good idea.

After the flood, many nations are born. The sons of Noah spread out, and their children have children. Genesis 10 lists seventy nations, with a variety of languages, gradually filling the earth as God designed, with a proliferation of cultural diversity. That diversity is a hallmark of humanity.

God equipped humans with creativity and commissioned us to fill the earth, but humans often take God's good gift and bend it toward our own designs. That is exactly what we see in the story of Babel in Genesis 11. We often refer to this story as "The Tower of Babel," but the people build both a city and a tower. The city is the story's focus. It is a tale of God's response to unsanctioned centralized power.

On the heels of Genesis 10, with its diverse list of nations, the claim that the people spoke a single language is a bit suspicious. David Smith notes that the phrase "one speech" in Assyrian texts consistently functions as "a metaphor for the subjugation and assimilation of conquered peoples."¹¹ If he's right, then "one speech" is no utopian ideal but rather suggests a uniformity imposed on the people—an official language that stamps out diversity.

The men's speech in Genesis 11:3 reads like a Dr. Seuss rhyme: *Habah, nilbenah lebenim venisrephah lisrephah*. Could this tight wordplay point to the reduced vocabulary of those forced to communicate in a second language? They say to one another, "Come, let us brickmake bricks, and let us fire [them] with fire" (my translation).

Many readers assume the tower of Babel is a means for humans to climb to heaven, as though the people are trying to achieve divine status.¹² Others suggest that the builders wanted the gods to descend to them.¹³ The second option seems more likely, based on the purpose of ancient ziggurats. Ziggurats were massive staircases built to facilitate the travel of the gods between earthly and heavenly

temples. If this explanation made you think of Jacob's dream in Genesis 28, then you get bonus points! With his head on a stone for a pillow, Jacob dreamed of a stone stairway on which angels descended and ascended—most likely a ziggurat.

Temples were the center of ancient civilizations, with as much as a quarter of the population involved in their maintenance.¹⁴ A ziggurat would be built adjacent to such a temple. It was a solid structure filled with rubble. The entire structure was meant to stabilize the staircase built into its outermost layer. People did not climb these structures. They were for the gods.

However, the plans for the city of Babel make no mention of temples.¹⁵ I am intrigued by a third possibility. The tower is a *migdal* in Hebrew, a word that usually refers to a watchtower. Some watchtowers stood in the middle of vineyards so guards could ensure that ripe fruit was not stolen. Others were built into city walls for military protection. Since the people are building a city, the *migdal* could be part of the city's defense system. A tower with its top in the heavens would allow the people to spot a far-off approaching army, giving them adequate time to prepare for battle. A watchtower suggests that the project is fueled by fear. If their city fell to an invasion, they would be forced to scatter.

This militaristic interpretation of the city's tower fits with clues left for us in Genesis 10:8-12. There the narrator interrupts a lengthy genealogy to introduce Nimrod, a warrior, hunter, and city builder whose name means "we shall rebel."¹⁶ Babel is his city. José Míguez-Bonino explains that Nimrod's titles are connected: "He is a *gibbor* (a mighty warrior) and a *gibbor sayid* (a mighty warrior of beasts). Babel's founder was, then, a tyrant with respect to both humans and beasts."¹⁷ Nimrod was infamous for his violence. Talk about a perversion of God's intention for humanity!

Whether you see the tower in Genesis 11 as a ziggurat or a watchtower, the point of the story is clear: God frustrates human efforts to call the shots. Either way, the story is laced with irony. The turning point of the story is the moment when Yahweh descends to see what the "sons of the human had built" (Genesis 11:5, my translation). If they were hoping that God would descend to dwell among them, they got their wish. Yahweh did come down, but the result made their worst fear come true. God determined that their project was illegitimate and scattered the people, precisely what they were trying to avoid.

On the other hand, if they built a tower as a military defense, they failed to anticipate their greatest threat: Yahweh. Comically, their impressive city and tower were so small to God that he had to come down to see it.¹⁸ Humankind more than met its match.

The fact that the city is named Babel is important. In Genesis 10:10 the same city (*Babel* in Hebrew) is translated “Babylon” in the NIV. Babylon is the capital city of a nation that would later ravage the city of Jerusalem and take God’s people into captivity. This story functions as a critique of worldly powers that dominate others in their quest for immortal fame. God will not tolerate oppressive empires.

The city of Babel (that is, Babylon) represented an attempt to avoid the creation mandate to fill the earth. Rather than spread out to cultivate and care for every corner of creation, the people conspired behind city walls, hoping to make a name for themselves. Mature wisdom and immortality—the two gifts of Eden’s garden—still elude them here.

God puts a stop to the militaristic empire being built at Babel. However, his scattering is not punitive but restorative. If humans were meant to fill the earth, then his scattering puts the story back on track, rescuing people from imperial domination. As Míguez-Bonino points out, “The punishment of imperial Babylon is simultaneously the liberation of diverse nations.”¹⁹

The idolatry of empire building is one manifestation of our failure to trust God. We long for something tangible to give us a sense of security. Ironically, idolatry is the inverse of our creation purpose. Rather than subduing creation, we submit to it and are subdued.²⁰

The scattering of the builders in Genesis 11 was a “reset button” for humanity, restoring God’s intention for humans to “fill the earth” (Genesis 1:28) rather than build fortresses from which to dominate others. But the downward spiral in Genesis 1–11 needed a response that was more than damage control. We needed a major rescue operation.

KEY IDEAS

- Both humans and angelic beings rebelled against God’s rule, refusing to maintain the order that God established.

- These rebellions and others like them relied on and resulted in violence.
- God sends the flood in response to human violence as an act of un-creation, allowing all creation a fresh start.
- Empire building is one human endeavor that tends to wield violence and erase diversity in order to centralize power rather than depending on the Creator.

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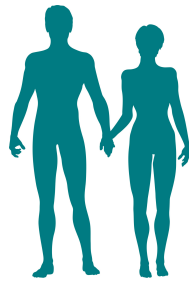
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BibleProject Videos: Spiritual Beings Series.

INTERMISSION

Being the Image and Bearing the Name



The end of [part one](#) brings us to the close of what scholars call the “primeval history”—Genesis 1–11. The last part of Genesis 11 and first part of Genesis 12 are a hinge between God’s cosmic purposes and God’s purpose for the family of Abraham. But don’t imagine for a moment that these are two unrelated texts randomly included on the same scroll. These two parts of Genesis are integrally connected. Here’s how:

(1) The book of Genesis is punctuated ten times by the Hebrew word *toledot*. The word means “generations” or “records,” and it marks off sections that are focused on each successive generation in the plot line. *Toledot* appears five times in Genesis 1–11 and five times in Genesis 12–50. Is this symmetry a coincidence? Unlikely.

(2) Just as God took Adam and placed him in the garden to initiate human stewardship of creation, he now takes Abram from Mesopotamia, the heart of human civilization in all its rebellion (remember Babel/Babylon), and moves him to the center of the Promised Land to begin restoring what has been lost. In other words, the two storylines not only mirror each other but depend on each other. Adam and Eve’s failure is the reason we need God’s promise to Abraham and Sarah.

In Genesis 12:1-3, God invites Abram to enter into a covenant sealed by the promise of three things: land, descendants, and blessing. God gives Abram land that

will later be described like the Garden of Eden (see Deuteronomy 8). He promises that Abram (“father”) will become Abraham (“father of many”). And he says these words that set the trajectory for the rest of the biblical storyline:

“I will bless those who bless you,
and whoever curses you I will curse;
and all peoples on earth
will be blessed through you.” (Genesis 12:3)

This promise is the key link between Genesis 1–11 and Genesis 12–50. Abraham’s family will solve the problem of human rebellion initiated by Adam and Eve by bringing God’s blessing to all nations. This is where the concept of *bearing God’s name* begins. Starting in Genesis 12, the focus of the biblical narrative is primarily on the people who bear God’s name while the concept of *being God’s image* fades to the background. Of course God’s name-bearers are human so they retain their identity as God’s image. But between Genesis 12 and the Gospels, the Scriptures are primarily about the covenant. If you like, you can pause your reading of this book and read *Bearing God’s Name* next. After that, you could pick up here and finish *Being God’s Image*. Each book traces a different thread through the Bible, but they belong together.

One place where these themes intersect is in the Ten Commandments. At Sinai, Yahweh tells those who bear his name (Exodus 20:7) not to make images to worship (Exodus 20:2-6). As Tim Mackie notes in the BibleProject video on the Image of God, “People are not to make images of God because God has already made images of himself,” namely humans!¹ This casts idolatry in a new light. Christopher Wright explains, “Since idolatry diminishes the glory of God, and since humans are made in the image of God, it follows that idolatry is also detrimental to the very essence of our humanity.”²

Jesus models both dimensions of our vocation: being human and being a covenant partner. He not only bears God’s name well but also functions perfectly as God’s image. Jesus’ humanity matters because without it he could not embody our human vocation. In [part three](#) we’ll explore how Jesus demonstrates our identity and purpose, securing our future. But first we need to understand how we got here.

In [part two](#), we'll sample a few books in the Old Testament known as Wisdom literature. They tend to be less “covenantal” and less explicitly tied to Israel’s history. Instead, they are rooted in creation and wrestle more broadly with the human condition—desire for intimacy, desire for meaning, desire for practical wisdom, and the need to understand suffering. These books have wisdom to offer us in our quest to discover what it means to be human.

Jesus models both
dimensions of our vocation:
being human and being
a covenant partner.

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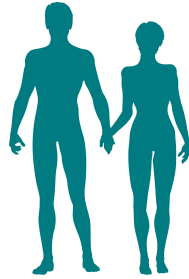
BibleProject Video: “Blessing and Curse.”

PART 2

THE WAY OF WISDOM



THE HUMAN QUEST



HOW DO WE KNOW?

When our youngest child was about three years old, he had an amusing way of explaining his thinking process. We'd ask, "What gave you that idea?" or "How do you know that?"

He'd reply, "Tummy told me." For Easton, the internal deliberation that is a normal part of human cognition took place right in the center of his being, in his tummy. If he just knew something, and no one told him, then it came from his tummy. This, I suppose, is what we call a gut feeling.

If we allow Genesis 1 and 2 to inform our ideas, neither thinking nor doing is a measure of human worth. We are God's image, plain and simple, no matter our intelligence or our virtue. However, our bodies facilitate our engagement with the world. They are our means of knowing and being known. In Genesis 3, desire is what reshapes Eve and Adam's thinking about God. They want to be like God. They allow the serpent to define good and evil, which leads them to eat what God said was off limits.

Theologian James K. A. Smith insists that we are not brains on a stick. Our bodies matter. Our thinking does not develop in thin air but is shaped by our habits, which are driven by our loves. As Smith puts it, *you are what you love*.¹ What we desire determines what we do, which in turn transforms the way we think.

If knowing is embodied, and rooted in desire, then wisdom is engaging well with the world and pursuing the right kinds of things. According to the Bible, we cultivate wisdom in two ways. First, by trusting God as the source of wisdom. God reveals his will in history through the prophets. The Scriptures are a written record of that revelation. At Sinai God revealed many particulars about how the covenant people could live wisely. (I discuss God's revelatory wisdom in *Bearing God's Name*.) All of them involve doing or not doing certain things out of obedience to God's command, learning to love what God loves and hate what God hates.

The other method of cultivating wisdom is carefully observing the way the world works and choosing what is good. Experience teaches us. The books of Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Songs offer wise observations about how to live well. While Proverbs is part of inspired Scripture, it does not present itself as direct divine revelation. The sages are not claiming to speak on God's behalf. They are teaching others what they have learned through observation, through conversations with others who have a handle on life, or through their own lived experience. Each of these books is associated with King Solomon in some way.

Proverbs presents wisdom personified as a woman:

Do not forsake wisdom, and she will protect you;
love her, and she will watch over you.
The beginning of wisdom is this: Get wisdom.
Though it cost all you have, get understanding.
Cherish her, and she will exalt you;
embrace her, and she will honor you. (Proverbs 4:6-8)

Wisdom is something we must want. Desire is key. We must love her and spend all we have on her, cherishing and embracing her.

The book of Kings portrays Solomon as the wisest man of his day. When God gave him the opportunity in a dream, Solomon chose "a listening heart to govern . . . and to distinguish between right and wrong" (1 Kings 3:9, my translation).² This was what he most desired—above wealth or honor. Solomon's choice is itself wise. By asking for wisdom, Solomon also receives wealth and honor.

Solomon demonstrated his wisdom through administering justice (1 Kings 3:16-28), by maintaining peace in his domain (1 Kings 4:20-28), and by composing proverbs and songs and demonstrating knowledge of the natural world (1 Kings 4:29-34). However, his story ends badly, proving that wisdom is not an achievement to gloat over but a muscle to exercise. The wisdom Solomon possessed at the beginning of his reign did not see him through to the end. New loves took him off course. Apparently, he stopped listening for God's definition of good and evil.

Wisdom always involves a choice. The choice in the garden was either to trust that God had humans' best interests in mind or grasp for more than what God provided. Like all of us, Solomon was faced daily with choices between trusting God's good

commands or charting his own course. Repeatedly, Solomon ignored Moses' instructions for Israel's future kings in Deuteronomy 17, warnings not to accumulate wealth, military power, and wives. He chased after political power in ways that took his heart off track. He trusted in himself, his military power, and his diplomatic ties more than he trusted God. His many wives persuaded him to tolerate and eventually participate in the worship of other gods.

How, then, can we truly know what is best? N.T. Wright suggests that "love is the deepest mode of knowing because it is love that, while completely engaging with reality other than itself, affirms and celebrates that other-than-self reality."³ If Wright is right, then cultivating love for God and love for neighbor is the surest way to help us discern what is best. Jesus later identified these as the two greatest commandments (Matthew 22:36-40).

Wisdom is not
an achievement
to gloat over but a muscle
to exercise.

IS THE BIBLE'S WISDOM UNIQUE?

From time to time, biblical scholarship makes it to the front page of a major news outlet, announcing a major discovery. Often, these stories fuel people's fears by suggesting that the Bible isn't as unique as people once assumed. For some whose high view of Scripture depends on it being utterly unique, learning that the Bible may have borrowed from another ancient text is jarring. Let's consider the case of the Instruction of Amenemope.

Amenemope is an Egyptian text that dates to about 1200 BCE. It sounds a lot like the biblical book of Proverbs. For example, Amenemope chapter 6 reads, "Do not move the markers on the borders of fields, nor shift the position of the measuring-cord. Do not be greedy for a cubit of land, nor encroach on the boundaries of a widow."^a This sounds remarkably similar to Proverbs 22:28, which reads, "Do not move an ancient boundary stone set up by your ancestors," and Proverbs 23:10-11, which reads,

Do not move an ancient boundary stone
or encroach on the fields of the fatherless,
for their Defender is strong;
he will take up their case against you.

Not only could we cite multiple examples that address similar concerns, but Proverbs 22:20 introduces "thirty sayings" as a distinct collection while Amenemope is structured in thirty brief chapters.^b Most of the parallels with Amenemope appear in this section of Proverbs. Should the potential of "borrowing" concern us?

The Scriptures tell us that Solomon was the wisest man of his day. Notably, his proverbs were enjoyed by visitors from far-flung places (1 Kings 4:32, 34; 10:23-25). This should make us less suspicious of the possibility that some of the biblical proverbs may have come from outside Israel or vice versa. Reading about Solomon's kingdom leads me to expect international dialogue and collaboration.^c As we consider what it means to be human, Proverbs stands as an example of the maxim "all truth is God's truth." Humans are the *imago Dei*, which means that we can learn from those outside the family of faith. If their words do not contradict Scripture, we need not be threatened by them. The authors of Scripture weren't.

FINDING SEXUAL FULFILLMENT

If love is key to knowing, and if our bodies are part of how we come to know things, then we need to talk about sex. The presence of erotic poetry in the Bible comes as a bit of a shock to those of us who grew up in churches where modesty is a cardinal virtue. The Song of Songs feels out of place. Many faith communities have insisted on reading it allegorically, as a celebration of God's love for Israel or Christ's for the church. If the thought of a sermon on sex makes you squirm, maybe allegory is a welcome relief! The allegorical reading of this text has a long history.

However, those who first read the Song spiritually were not avoiding human sexuality. In fact, they believed that human sexuality was the most fitting expression of the covenant relationship between God and Israel or Christ and the church. In the words of Eugene Peterson, "The ancients did not read the Song devotionally because they were embarrassed by its sexuality, but because they understood sexuality in sacramental ways."⁴ In other words, early interpreters heard in this Song a celebration of human romance that is mirrored in spiritual realities.

Our sexuality is part of how God made us. Male and female are both present before the fall in the Garden of Eden. The survival of the human race depends on men and women engaging intimately with each other. But there's more to sex than procreation. As Marc Cortez points out, animals have babies, too, but humans alone are described in Genesis 1 as "male and female." Our complementary sexuality draws us to bond with one another, not just within marriage or during intercourse but in a wide variety of friendships and partnerships between humans who are both alike and different.⁵

God designed these partnerships to contribute to the flourishing of creation by sharing responsibility for dominion over nonhuman creation (animals and growing things as well as natural resources). And while these partnerships could take a variety of forms, God intends for us to reserve sexual intimacy for marriage. Sex is not only a means for producing children but also a way to bring delight and reinforce the marriage bond.

Our culture distorts sex, framing it as a need rather than a gift and as an individual right rather than the most intimate expression of an exclusively committed relationship. Sexual expression, sexual preference, sexual orientation, and sexual activity dominate the current quest for human identity. Because our culture teaches us to see sex as a need and a right of self-expression or self-fulfillment, sex quickly becomes selfish rather than self-giving. If the focus is on

fulfilling one's own desires, one's partner becomes a means to an end. A faithful reading of Scripture invites us to lovingly give ourselves to another rather than use others to meet our own perceived "needs."

Sex requires vulnerability. In a scenario where lovers are not committed to each other for life, the risk of rejection is high. Even in committed relationships, hopes can be fragile. In sex we ideally present our unfiltered and unmasked selves to each other. Adam and Eve were naked and not ashamed (Genesis 2:25), but since the fall, many of us struggle with baring our bodies because we fear we are not enough. Not curvy enough. Not virile enough. Not desirable enough. Not responsive enough.

I suspect this is one reason why the use of pornography is so widespread. With porn, one can find some measure of sexual gratification without risking rejection or worrying about performance. We can avoid strained relational dynamics and stop worrying about whether we want too much, too often. However, porn instigates its own cycle of problems.

THE PORN PROBLEM

As *Time* magazine's cover story reported in 2016, pornography rewires the human brain, making it increasingly difficult for a person to respond to an embodied sexual partner.^a Porn prevents us from connecting well with each other. It functions as an escape hatch that avoids the more difficult work of resolving conflict or expressing feelings and desires that are essential for relational health.

Young people may assume that porn use is temporary, a way of maintaining sexual "health" until they are married, after which they will no longer need it. But that's not how porn works. Pornography establishes neurological pathways in your brain that make it more and more difficult to find embodied sexual fulfillment, even while married.

Worst of all, pornography is exploitative, whether the viewers or participants are male or female. Pornography is prostitution and sexual abuse on camera. The entire multibillion-dollar porn-production industry depends on human trafficking and repeated rape. Even those who voluntarily enter into porn production often do so because they have no better options. Many believe the lie that their best or only asset is their body, or that the only way they can make a living is by selling their body to be used by people whose "needs" are not being met in real, embodied relationships.

A corollary can be seen in prostitution, which is essentially embodied porn (that is, sexual gratification without relational commitment). A recent article explains that "85-95 percent of those in prostitution want to escape it, but have no other options for survival."^b This is even true in countries where prostitution has been legalized.^c The authors go on to say that "women who have worked in prostitution exhibit the same incidence of traumatic brain injury as has been documented in torture survivors."^d Clearly, the sex industry fails to promote human flourishing.

Porn distorts and destroys trusting in-person relationships. Porn degrades the men, women, and children who are on camera as well as those who access it, eroding each one's sense of worth as someone made in God's image.

Jesus made clear that looking at someone lustfully is a form of adultery. By this standard, the church is guilty of adulterous behavior in epidemic proportions. About 70 percent of church-going men (and over 50 percent of pastors) regularly access porn.^e Increasing numbers of women are viewing porn, currently as many as 30 percent. Porn robs marriages of the exhilaration of genuine connection. Trying to quit porn can feel like a losing battle because porn is highly addictive. Neurologically and chemically, it works like a drug. Most will need outside help to quit. If porn is a problem for you, check out the Conquer Series and find support.^f

The church has invested enormous energy in trying to keep unmarried people from having sex, but we talk very little about the beauty of sexual expression within marriage.⁶ Perhaps we are too prudish. The Song of Songs is not the least bit shy about the power of human sexual desire and the glory of the human body. Every moment the couple is separated they long to be together. Their relationship is no one-night stand but a sustained, passionate love affair fueled by mutual desire. Our capacity for this type of bond is part of what it means to be human. Intimacy is also a necessary component of our human ability to “fill the earth.”

So what happens when sexual intimacy is not possible, either due to singleness, illness, or disability? What about those who are same-sex attracted? Is it possible to be fully human without sex?

Thankfully, the Bible’s answer to this last question is a resounding yes. Wesley Hill writes, “Woven into the fabric of Christian theology is the insistence that Jesus Christ is the truest, most perfect, most glorious human being who has ever lived—and that those who want to experience true, full, rich humanness must become like him, must pattern their lives after Jesus’ humanity (Romans 8:29; Ephesians 4:20-24; Colossians 3:1-17).”⁷ Jesus was single. He navigated life without a partner in marriage and without sexual intimacy. This reality means a lot to Wesley Hill, a gay man who has chosen celibacy out of obedience to his understanding of Scripture. He explains, “I am not alone as a gay Christian. I am not the only one who has chosen voluntarily to say no to impulses I believe are out of step with God’s desires.”⁸ As his good friend once reminded him, “Living with unfulfilled desires is not the exception of the human experience but the rule.”⁹

The church today has largely lost sight of the virtue of celibacy, but we would do well to recover it. Side by side in Scripture we see the Song of Songs, which celebrates sexual intimacy, and we see Jesus, the ultimate human, who never had sex. Our sexuality is a gift. God designed marriage as the context in which it may be fully expressed and enjoyed. Your faithfulness to your spouse is a testimony. But if you are single, whether by choice or by circumstance, then your faithfulness to Jesus through celibacy is an equally powerful testimony. You who are celibate are uniquely positioned to give of yourself all the more to God and to neighbor. The surrender of your desire to Christ is a model for the whole church. You have much to teach the rest of us about devotion to Christ. That doesn’t mean the road will be

easy. The suffering of surrendered desire is possible in light of the even greater hope of union with Christ in the new creation.

THE PATH OF WISDOM

In Psalm 8, David marvels at the position of humanity at the pinnacle of creation, crowned to rule over all living things on God's behalf (Genesis 1:26-28). Against the backdrop of the expansive night sky, humans seem so small. "What is mankind that you are mindful of them, / human beings that you care for them?" (Psalm 8:4). It seems like too much responsibility!

Yet that is precisely the point. God uses the weak to do his work. "The praise of children and infants" becomes a defense against enemy attack in Psalm 8:2. Tim Mackie notes that Psalm 8 is situated at the heart of the first collection of psalms associated with David.¹⁰ Psalms 3–7 express David's distress in the face of enemy attack while Psalms 9–14 are the cries of the afflicted for rescue. In the center is Psalm 8, which celebrates the exalted position of humanity to rule on God's behalf. The psalm does not portray the ideal human flexing muscles. God appoints the weak, rather than the strong, to rule so that we will depend on God's strength rather than our own. It is babies who establish the stronghold through their praise!

Psalm 8 is framed with this declaration: "Yahweh, our Lord, / how majestic is your name in all the earth!" (Psalm 8:1, 9). Although in our weakness we wear the crown of delegated authority, Yahweh deserves all the glory. How remarkable that the God of all the earth makes us the object of his attention and care!

Have you ever stood on the edge of a cliff overlooking the ocean? Or at the top of a mountain looking out over expansive wilderness? Nature has a way of putting life in perspective. Problems that seem insurmountable become almost petty. Walking through the woods or filling our lungs with sea air powerfully reminds us that, in the grand scheme of things, we're small. Wide open spaces shrink our concerns and chasten our egos.

Psalm 144 reflects further on human vocation, echoing the language of Psalm 8: "Yahweh, what are human beings that you care for them, / mere mortals that you think of them?" (Psalm 144:3). In this psalm, David highlights human mortality: "They are like a breath; / their days are like a fleeting shadow" (Psalm 144:4). It's

true. In the grand sweep of history, our lives are short. Psalm 144 expresses a dependence on God to supply strength for battle, to rescue from distress, and to bring prosperity.

Here's the thing about being human—about being appointed to rule creation on God's behalf. It has nothing to do with our qualifications and everything to do with God's empowerment. On our own we are not enough.

Our desperate need for help, expressed in the Psalms, is matched in the book of Proverbs with an invitation to be mentored by Lady Wisdom. The desire to define good

On our own we are not
enough.

and evil for themselves disqualified Adam and Eve from life in God's presence in the garden. The rest of the Bible's storyline works to restore humans' relationship with God. To do this always involves a call to return to God's wisdom.

Creation themes are strong in Proverbs 8, where God's wisdom is personified as a woman who watches with joy as God designs the cosmos and delights in humankind (Proverbs 8:30-31). God's wisdom is evident in the order of creation. As Psalm 146 celebrates, Yahweh provides abundantly for all creatures and cares for the vulnerable. Wisdom is the essential means by which kings, rulers, princes, and nobles rule the earth (Proverbs 8:15-16). Wisdom is the path to life, longevity, and reward (Proverbs 8:35; 9:11-12). Lest we imagine that the quest for wisdom is solitary or introspective, Proverbs insists that this wisdom can only be found in the fear of Yahweh (Proverbs 9:10). The alternative, a disregard for Yahweh, leads to death (Proverbs 1:29-32). On our own, we are inadequate.

Here's the best news: Lady Wisdom calls out to the "simple" and "foolish" (Proverbs 8:5). The path of wisdom is not for the sophisticated. We don't have to register a certain IQ to qualify as "wise." The key to discovering wisdom is (ironically!) recognizing that we don't have the answers and that we are not in a position to know what's best. That's really the whole point—that we learn to depend on God to show us the path to life. It was Adam and Eve's failure to do this that fractured their relationship with God, each other, and creation. They chose to eat from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil in spite of God's command not to do so. They decided they knew what was best. Proverbs calls us to choose a different path—the path of true wisdom. This path begins and ends in the fear of the LORD.

LONGING FOR MORE

Judging by the book of Psalms, to be human is to wrestle with a whole range of strong emotions: doubt, fear, angst, anger, sadness, disappointment, hope, celebration, relief, faith, joy, nostalgia, gratitude, and longing. While the Bible is God's Word, the Psalms preserve human words too, in the form of prayers and songs.

They invite us to bring our whole selves to God, not only to process our emotions but also to take action. Mysteriously, God hears and responds when we pray.

Remember Sinai? In Exodus 32, God announced to Moses his plan to destroy Israel. Moses interceded, and God changed his mind. This will come in handy in a moment.

The dynamic of intercessory prayer makes sense if we are God's image. As God's representatives on earth, we are tasked with implementing and supporting his rule. Is it any wonder that God invites us to bring our concerns, ideas, and hopes to him? After all, we are family. Perhaps you've imagined prayer as a pious exercise, something you need to get right to get results. The Psalms point to another way—a path of openness and honesty.

One of my favorite examples of this is Psalm 89. It's preceded by Psalm 88, the most melancholic psalm, which ends in utter darkness. That in itself should reshape what we consider to be faithful prayer. Apparently, Psalm 88 was a prayer worth recording, worth handing down to the next generation, and worth including in sacred Scripture. Psalm 89 seems at first to offer some relief. The psalmist celebrates God's faithful love to Israel. The psalm recounts God's promises to David, their king, from 2 Samuel 7, that he would never lack a descendant to sit on the throne in Jerusalem.

But then the psalm turns dark. Against this backdrop of God's good promises, the psalmist looks God in the eye and demands to know why God has allowed the dynasty to crumble (Psalm 89:38-45). It feels almost blasphemous to direct such passionate accusations at God. Yet, in light of the exile, it makes sense to wonder whether God has forgotten his promises to David. The psalmist cries out in anguish for an end to Israel's suffering.

The psalmist is not unfaithful. A psalmist who had lost faith would have no urge to pray. Psalm 89 displays the strongest faith—faith that takes God at his word and engages in rigorous intercession.

The psalm ends, as most psalms do, without a resolution. It is merely a snapshot, a moment in the life of faith. Perhaps you’ve had moments like these when it felt like your whole world was crumbling and you wondered whether God even cared. Psalm 89 emboldens me to question God, to bring my crises to his attention and call for his response. After all, as Peter asked Jesus, “Lord, to whom shall we go?” (John 6:68). The same God who has stopped short of preventing whatever crisis you face is the only one able to change the outcome. So we pray.

The book of Psalms is not a random assortment of prayers. It is carefully arranged to instruct us in the life of faith. That’s why we need to watch what happens next. After Psalm 89, the psalmist’s honest accusation of God, Moses responds. Psalm 90 is his prayer. Evidently, whoever arranged the book of Psalms shared the psalmist’s concern that the Davidic covenant had fizzled out. He reached back even further, all the way back to Moses, the one who successfully interceded for a rebellious nation that deserved God’s wrath back in Exodus 32.

In Psalm 90, Moses pleads with God for relief, “Relent, LORD! How long will it be?” (Psalm 90:13). His prayer ends without resolution, as most of our prayers do. But Psalm 91 brings God’s answer:

“Because he loves me,” says the LORD, “I will rescue him;
I will protect him, for he acknowledges my name.
He will call on me, and I will answer him;
I will be with him in trouble,
I will deliver him and honor him.” (Psalm 91:14-15)

In my most desperate moments I have found the Psalms to be a tremendous comfort. They have given me words when I no longer knew what to pray. They have modeled for me a way to bring my whole self into God’s presence. The Psalms offer reassurance that God hears my cry and will answer.

KEY IDEAS

- To be human is to be embodied. Our desires shape what we know and how we know it.
- God created our sexed bodies as a means of procreation as well as bonding in marriage. Marital intimacy is not an essential element of our personhood but may be received as a gift from God.
- Human weakness and mortality do not disqualify us from fulfilling our human destiny. Dependence on God through honest prayer is the path to wisdom.

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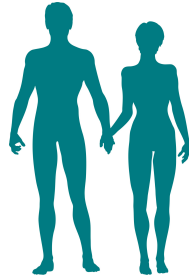
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HUMAN SUFFERING



WORKING TO GET?

The Bible's Wisdom literature does not just offer sage advice on the human quest for knowledge or for intimacy or for ruling creation. These books also address the challenges we face with suffering and disillusionment. No book about what it means to be human would be complete without a look at these problems.

Ecclesiastes is a natural point of entry to this topic. For many of us, this book really resonates. We work hard to exercise our God-given talents in service of the greater good, but so much remains to be done, and we become weary. Even if we make a positive impact, we face the daunting prospect that our work will soon be forgotten or undone.

Ecclesiastes presents the words of a man who has tried it all. We'll call him the Teacher. With the Teacher, we lament,

All things are wearisome,
more than one can say. . . .
What has been will be again,
what has been done will be done again;
there is nothing new under the sun. . . .

No one remembers the former generations,
and even those yet to come
will not be remembered
by those who follow them. (Ecclesiastes 1:8-9, 11)

Can you name your great-great grandmother? No? Neither can I. This is a sobering thought. In all likelihood, my children's grandchildren will barely know me, and to their children my name will mean nothing. We are but a blip on the screen, a fleeting moment in a series of fleeting moments. The Teacher gets this.

I'm convinced that he is not trying to depress us. Rather, the Teacher of Ecclesiastes is taking a sober look at human ambition and recognizing its limits. You and I are dispensable. People die all the time, and the world keeps turning without their hard work. If we lift a bucket of water out of the ocean, it does not leave a hole. Perhaps this is why retirement or prolonged illness or disability can be so unsettling. In addition to a dramatic shift in daily routines and social networks, a new question plagues us: If the world can go on without my work, then why did I work in the first place? What good did it do?

The Teacher despairs at his inability to hang on to what he's achieved. His conclusion? Stop working for what you don't have yet. Start enjoying the journey. If we pour all our energy into getting somewhere else, we miss the joys available to us in the present. If you've thought of the book of Ecclesiastes as cynical, look again. Yes, the book contains cynicism, but also the possibility of joy. Again and again the Teacher invites us to stop and smell the roses. Don't spend your life yearning for what you don't have. Instead, enjoy what you have already. Being able to "eat and drink, and find satisfaction in [our] toil—this is the gift of God" (Ecclesiastes 3:13).

The Teacher doesn't give up on work. He urges, "Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with all your might" (Ecclesiastes 9:10). But since we're all going to die at some point, and eventually be forgotten, he wants us to enjoy life along the way.

It's not that our work doesn't matter, but the Teacher says, in essence, to loosen your belt buckle and eat another helping of dessert. Relish what God has given. Do what you love and love what you do (Ecclesiastes 9:7-10). The world does not depend on your success. Rest in that. Life won't always make sense. It will feel like things go 'round and 'round without progress or like those who don't deserve it get the lucky break and those who do lose everything. But don't panic. As meaningless

as it seems, God hasn't stopped ruling the world. He'll work it out eventually. In the meantime, work, love, and celebrate. No need to be more pious than God. He wants you to accept and enjoy his gifts.

For this girl of Dutch descent, the whole thing sounds suspicious, like a coupon that will turn out to be expired once I've driven across town and stood in line for twenty minutes. ("I knew it was too good to be true.") Is celebration a slippery slope that will land me in a self-indulgent mess?

On the contrary, realizing that I will eventually die frees me to stop obsessing about my work and enjoy it for its own sake.

If I can live with a properly sized view of my own importance in the grand scheme of things (that is, minuscule), then turning in my

keys will be less likely to undermine my sense of self. I am not what I do. I am not what I produce. My identity is rooted in my status as the image of God, a status I did nothing to earn. The fulfillment I find in leaning in to how God wired me can be just as easily experienced without a paycheck. I can represent God to creation in a hundred other ways.

My identity is rooted in my status as the image of God, a status I did nothing to earn.

FINDING OUR VOCATION

A friend of mine stumbled on a new vocation in an unexpected way. Steve Aden started sending me prayers via Facebook messenger. The prayers stopped me in my tracks. I knew nothing about Steve, but his prayers helped me to take a deep breath and rest in God's love for me. Here's his story in his own words, shared with his permission.

I had been in the ministry for twenty-five years, when a freak car accident injured my back, legs, and neck. Because of my injuries I could no longer work the eighty-hour week my job often required. I was in severe pain most days and spent a lot of time confined to bed.

For the next few years I went through a deep, dark valley. Ministry had always been the center of my life. It gave me direction and purpose. I prayed for several years, asking the Lord to give me something to do. He did that for me. Here is how it happened:

When I was a minister, I was constantly being asked to pray. I prayed in the church and in the community, in hospitals and retirement homes, for organizations, for individuals. After my ministry ended, people would still ask me to pray for them periodically. Then I started doing something that revolutionized my life: I started sending my written prayers to the people I was praying for. Initially, most of the people I did this for were friends and people that I'd known for years. Gradually the number of people on my prayer list grew. During this time I was still praying that God would give me something to do—unaware of the fact that he had already done so! One day as I was writing prayers, praying them and sending them, the Lord slapped me up against my head (figuratively) and said to me (once again figuratively) "I've given you this ministry of prayer. Now start ministering like you mean it." So I started focusing deliberately on my new ministry.

Now I spend most of my time writing, praying, and sending prayers. I often get up early in the morning and write my prayers. This ministry has grown by leaps and bounds. The Lord is constantly bringing new people into my life. Many people are now responding to my prayers by sending back a prayer for me! And I have learned that many people are also sending prayers to others in their lives. You might call it a spiritual chain reaction.

None of this was planned by me. The Lord has done it all, in response to my cries and longings and heartfelt requests for something of eternal value to do. I guess you could say I'm back in the ministry. The Lord is faithful to work in and through us. Our job is to pay attention, and when he opens a door, to walk through it. He will use us to impact eternity.

IS LIFE REALLY MEANINGLESS?

The book of Ecclesiastes is famous for teaching that life is meaningless:

“Meaningless! Meaningless,”
says the Teacher.

“Utterly meaningless!
Everything is meaningless.” (Ecclesiastes 1:2)

But is it really? The short answer is no. Life is not meaningless. Why, then, would Ecclesiastes say that it is?

Translators have a difficult job balancing faithful representation of the original words and faithful communication of the sense of those words. Each language has its own vocabulary (obviously), and roughly equivalent words in different languages never have exactly the same range of meaning. While in most passages the meaning comes through well in English, translations occasionally miss the mark. This passage in Ecclesiastes is one example. Ecclesiastes conveys the perspective of an old man who has seen everything and tried everything. He wryly comments on his attempt to grasp the point of it all. Unfortunately, grasping life’s meaning is no easier than grasping a cloud. The human perspective is too limited to see the big picture. We simply can’t wrap our minds around it. The meaning of life is fleeting.

The Teacher in Ecclesiastes used a metaphor to convey how difficult it is to grasp the meaning of life. He said it was *hevel*, or vapor.

“*Hevel, hevel*,” says the Teacher. “Everything is utterly *hevel*.”

“Vapor, vapor,” says the Teacher. “Everything is utterly vaporous.”

To call everything *hevel* does not mean that life is devoid of meaning; rather it indicates that the meaning of life is beyond our ability to fully grasp. Just when we think we have a glimpse of our life’s purpose, the shape changes, and then it disappears from view. So where does that leave us?

I know a man who worked like mad at the beginning of his career. His goal was to retire at fifty so he worked all the overtime he could while his kids were young. His kids had grown up and left the house as he entered retirement. That’s when they discovered that his wife had incurable cancer. She soon died. “*Hevel, hevel*,” the Teacher would say. When our eyes are always on the future, we miss the joy that’s right under our noses.

Ecclesiastes urges us to enjoy the journey. Stop trying so feverishly to figure life out, but be grateful for moments of pleasure and satisfaction—food, drink, friends—these are gifts from our Creator. Rather than working yourself to the bone to achieve

something beyond your grasp, look at work as a blessing in and of itself. Work brings its own kind of fulfillment to be enjoyed.

If I were on a Bible translation committee, I would preserve the metaphor so that readers could chew on it themselves: “Vapor, vapor,” says the Teacher, “Everything is utterly vaporous.” After all, life is not meaningless. We simply aren’t in a position to completely grasp its meaning.

WHEN LIFE’S NOT FAIR

The Bible paints a stunning vision of God’s plan to restore all things. Sometimes we get a glimpse of this restoration in our own lives. Most of the time we’re in the messy middle—between God’s good creation and the new creation to come. To be human is to live with fractured relationships, physical limitations, and all the disappointments that come with living in a world marred by sin.

Ecclesiastes gives good advice about living in a world where it seems difficult to know if we’re making a difference. *Enjoy the journey*. But what about times when the journey includes one deep disappointment after the other? I began writing this chapter in 2020, which was a year chock-full of losses. As the death toll rose, lockdowns became stricter, preventing us from connecting with each other. The pandemic took a significant toll on mental health. Life-giving routines were disrupted. I watched marriages dissolve and mental health crumble among close family members and friends. It was a harrowing year. As I finish this chapter, it’s 2022. Who could have imagined that we’d still be battling a global pandemic? We are all weary. How long will this last?

The book of Job is the Bible’s extended answer to human questions about suffering. Framing the book is a story of a man of exemplary character who had it all and then lost it all. His name is Job (pronounced with a long *o*, like *robe*). The heart of the book is a dramatic conversation between Job and his three friends, each of whom wrestles with why Job encountered calamity. Job insists that he is innocent; his suffering is undeserved, and God is unjust. His friends think all suffering happens for a reason. They conclude that Job must have committed some despicable sin to deserve what has happened to him. As readers, we sit in a unique position, having witnessed the heavenly scene that instigated the whole ordeal. We

know what Job's friends do not—Job is indeed innocent, and his suffering is a test of his worship. Does Job worship God only for what he can get out of it, or is his worship purely based on God's worthiness? This is the question raised by the adversary.

Job comes close to despair. Job 3, where he wishes he had never been born, is one of the darkest chapters of the Bible. In his distress, Job flips Psalm 8 on its head. The psalmist had marveled over God's care and attention for humans. Job wishes that God would fixate his attention somewhere else. Most prayers in the Bible call on God to look with favor on the one praying. Job shudders under God's gaze, feeling that he's in the crosshairs of a divine weapon: "Will you never look away from me, / or let me alone even for an instant? . . . / Why have you made me your target?" (Job 7:19-20).

Although we were able to see the scene that instigated Job's suffering, as readers we share Job's question: Is God just? His test of Job seems arbitrary and cruel. After a painfully long silence, God finally answers Job in Job 38 and 39. More accurately, he questions Job. God refuses to defend his own actions. He does not owe Job an explanation. Instead, he exposes Job's limited perspective. The human brain is simply not equipped to comprehend God's ways. We are not in a position to do so.

This may sound like a discouraging message, but the book helps us in two key ways. First, it honors our struggle. God is hard on Job's judgmental friends, but he does not condemn Job. Human suffering naturally

provokes deep wrestling, and that's okay. The book of Job invites us to bring our deepest questions to God. Second, the book invites us to trust God's wisdom even when we can't see a larger purpose for our suffering. When we experience unexplainable loss or trial, we can rest in the fact that God has not abandoned us. Remember, we are part of God's royal family, and that status cannot be lost.

These lessons are just as true in the midst of a global pandemic as they were for Job. We'll never know why God allowed a virus to ravage the world, or even if that's the sort of thing in which God intervenes. But in the midst of our struggle, in the messy middle, God invites us to trust him. He has not abandoned us. He will not waste any of this (1 Corinthians 1:3-7).

The book of Job invites us
to bring our deepest
questions to God.

WHAT DOES IT ALL MEAN?

Humans have a natural desire to understand life. Pain is much harder to manage when we cannot see its purpose. A woman in labor knows a baby is coming. An athlete strives to increase in speed and strength in order to beat the competition. Even the pain of surgery is worth it if it means a healthier future. *No pain, no gain*, we say. But when pain has no explanation, we flounder. Why so many migraines? What's causing this abdominal pain? How do I get out from under this heavy cloud of depression? Why did my child walk away from her faith? Why did my loved one die in an accident? Why didn't my marriage last?

One of our college friends suffered from debilitating migraines for over a decade. He spent his days, months, and years secluded in a dark bedroom. His wife worked full time to provide for their family. His children barely knew him. Doctors were unwilling to give him stronger drugs to knock out the pain because they didn't want him to become addicted. So Chris suffered in silence.

One week he got a doozy of a headache that felt different from his typical migraine. After running some tests, doctors discovered an inoperable brain tumor, unrelated to his chronic migraines. They told Chris he was dying. Friends and family members were stunned. Chris, on the other hand, was elated. Finally, he could see the light at the end of his suffering! He would be healed, and he would see Jesus.

Ironically, since he was dying, doctors were no longer worried about habit-forming drugs, so they gave Chris strong painkillers. For the first time in years, he could leave his dark room and engage with his family. He attended his children's games and programs. They even went to Disneyland.

In the six months before his death, Chris joined Facebook. After years of withdrawal due to light sensitivity, Chris could finally reconnect with old friends. Talking with Chris was surreal—he was ecstatic about dying. Grounded. He understood what mattered most. And with no mask to hide behind, Chris spoke life into each of us. Chris taught the rest of us how to live.

That fall, about five months after his diagnosis, things were not looking good. Doctors said that Chris would not make it to November. His family wanted one last Christmas together, so they celebrated in October, just in case. Everyone on their

street put up Christmas lights. On the day of their family celebration, it snowed, just like a Hallmark movie.

Days later, Chris died.

We all wanted to scream, “Why?!”

Even as I tell you this story, I feel myself wanting to explain Chris’s death—to give it meaning. “In his dying, Chris taught the rest of us how to live.” Heaven forbid that any of us should suffer for no reason! Unexplained suffering is capable of pushing us to the brink of insanity. It makes a world of difference if our suffering is redeemed by some greater purpose or if we know things are going to turn out well in the end. This quest for meaning prompts people to say all sorts of well-meaning things that are neither true nor helpful.

“Everything happens for a reason!”

“This is all part of God’s plan.”

“God must be trying to teach you a lesson.”

Was the Holocaust part of God’s plan? Did the Rwandan genocide happen for a reason? What lesson was God trying to teach when the hurricane made landfall or the wildfires burned a whole town?

Job’s friends were convinced that suffering must have an explanation. Since Job suffered, he must have done something to deserve it. They told him so repeatedly. Job insisted that he was innocent. He did not deserve God’s punishment. On that basis he demanded an explanation from God. When God finally spoke up, he did not condemn Job’s actions, but he did put Job in his place. Humans are not in a position to understand God’s ways. God does not owe us an explanation. He simply invites us to trust him.

Bad things happen to good people because we live in a world scarred by brokenness. We suffer the consequences of our own sin as well as the sins of people we’ve never even met. Our society is shaped by people who act out of greed and selfishness. Even those who try to do the right thing often perpetuate injustice because they fail to consider the implications of their actions for others.

The bottom line is that we can never fully understand why things happen the way they do. We need to learn to live with the unknown.

LIVING WITHIN LIMITS

“Permit me to address you as dying men.”¹

One thing that’s certain about being human is that we will all die. We are mortal. From dust we came, and to dust will return. If we spent more time thinking about this, would it change the way we live? Evidence says it does.

One of my colleagues is nearing retirement. At seventy-five years old, he’s still teaching full time but considering when to back off. Unlike many who teach into their senior years, Ron is one of the most voracious learners I know. He is on the cutting edge of learning about gender identities and human sexuality. He’s savvy at connecting with students via Zoom and gives out his cellphone number so they can reach him at any time. Nearing the end of his career has given him a sense of clarity about how to invest his energy. He’s experiencing the freedom of writing for its own sake, not to secure a promotion.

Another colleague is only in his forties but just battled leukemia. Stepping away from his work for over a year to focus on surviving brought Ken tremendous clarity about what matters most. His brush with death made the various demands on his time seem less important, especially when a recent breakthrough case of Covid-19 gave him a scare and he began making end-of-life arrangements, just in case. Thinking about death has given Ken clarity about what he wants in life.

The ancient Israelites do not seem to have been preoccupied with the prospect of death. Ecclesiastes says it happens to everyone and that this should help us make the most of our days, not in a frenzy to produce or consume but in a healthy rhythm of work and rest conducive to enjoyment. In the Psalms, people often pray for rescue or healing by appealing to God’s self-interest rather than their own. “Do the dead praise you?” (see Psalm 88:10). The acknowledgment of our mortality lends weight to today. We are not guaranteed a tomorrow.

Perhaps you find the idea of living within limits distressing. In reality, it’s good news that we can’t do it all and that we don’t last forever. Death gives meaning to life. Without it we’d have the constant possibility of growth, which would render growth meaningless. As Moses says to God in Psalm 90,

You turn people back to dust,
saying “Return to dust, you mortals.”
A thousand years in your sight
are like a day that has just gone by,

or like a watch in the night.
Yet you sweep people away in the sleep of death—
they are like the new grass of the morning;
In the morning it springs up new,
but by evening it is dry and withered. . . .
Our days may come to seventy years,
or eighty, if our strength endures;
yet the best of them are but trouble and sorrow,
for they quickly pass, and we fly away. . . .
Teach us to number our days,
that we may gain a heart of wisdom. (Psalm 90:3-6, 10, 12)

Moses has a grip on mortality. He thinks it's wise for us to consider our limitations. Knowing we won't live forever (at least in our current state) motivates us to make the most of the time we have.

Realizing we can't do everything is humbling. It curbs our tendency to think of ourselves as superhuman. God does not expect more of us than we are able to give. If we're feeling stretched to the breaking point, then we have one of three problems: (1) we have said yes to something that was not from God, (2) we have set unrealistic expectations for ourselves, or (3) we have taken on something that was meant for the community to bear.

I address you as dying people.

Being God's image does not exempt you from suffering and death. You are going to die. You are not indispensable. God's purposes for creation are much larger than one person. This is a group project. Use that knowledge to motivate you to pursue what matters, to share the load, and to enjoy the journey.

KEY IDEAS

- Ecclesiastes addresses our disillusionment by calling us to enjoy the journey rather than always looking for what we don't yet have.
- Job invites us to trust God when we can't see the larger purposes for our suffering.

- Human mortality and the brokenness of our world means that we need to learn to live joyfully within limits.

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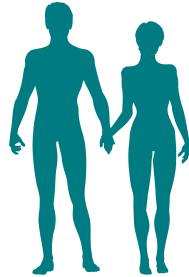
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PART 3

**HUMAN IN GOD'S
NEW WORLD**



JESUS, THE HUMAN



INCARNATION

Genesis 1 conveys our essential human identity as the image of God, introducing an important theme in Scripture. However, the phrase “image of God” only appears in Genesis 1, 5, and 9. Although we explored other avenues of Old Testament teaching on what it means to be human, the phrase “image of God” is absent from the rest of the Old Testament. When we cross over into the New Testament, we encounter several more passages that speak of the image of God. Strikingly, these all refer to Jesus.

For many of us, it goes without saying that Jesus is the image of God. After all, he *is* God! But if we view his status as God’s image primarily as a feature of his *deity*, we will be missing the point. Jesus is not the image of God because he is God. Jesus is the image of God because he is *human*. His entry into human history is not plan B but the culmination of plan A. Jesus is and does what humans were meant to be and do. He surrenders his own life for the sake of others. John signals this by opening his Gospel with the words, “in the beginning” (John 1:1).¹

While every human being is God’s image, Jesus fulfills God’s intentions perfectly for the vocation entailed by this identity. Like all of us, Jesus was human. He experienced all that we do—hunger, thirst, weariness, temptation. He required

sleep. He wept over loss. He was bullied and betrayed. He knew longing and desire and pain. He was injured, bled, and was scarred.

If the ideal human is an able-bodied, virile male, then the aging process automatically erodes a man's humanness. Looking at Jesus, we see that this cannot be the case. Being human on this side of the garden entails frailty, weakness, and dependence. Jesus experienced these things in his aging body without losing an inch of his status or dignity. In the next two chapters, we'll take a closer look at Jesus' birth, life, ministry, death, resurrection, and ascension. Each of these offers insight into the human condition.

While every human being is God's image, Jesus fulfills God's intentions perfectly for the vocation entailed by this identity.

THE GENDER OF JESUS

Jesus is the ideal human, representing God perfectly in the world. The book of Hebrews will help us flesh this out (excuse the pun), but first let's address one awkward problem that will occur to some readers: Jesus was male. (Before you get offended that I called this a problem, take a deep breath. Stay with me.) Jesus' sex is not a problem in and of itself, but some readers will wonder: Does this make man the human ideal and woman less than ideal in some way? How can a man represent both men and women? How can a male Savior serve as a model for women?

Amy Beverage Peeler addresses these questions in her profound book, *Women and the Gender of God*. To unravel this mystery, she asks us to closely consider Jesus' birth. We know we're human because we were conceived. Jesus' entrance into human history through the body of a woman establishes his humanity.^a It also says something about the female sex. If women were defective or substandard, God would not have chosen to enter the world through a woman.

God dignified women's bodies by being born of a woman. Her womb was his home. Her placenta nourished him. Her strong muscles pushed him through her birth canal (the birth canal he made!) into open air. He was covered in her blood long before he covered her with his own. Her hands held him. Her breasts nursed him. As a recent hymn expresses, "Maker of Mary, now Mary's son."^b

God could have chosen another way. But he chose a woman. What's more, God did not coerce Mary into this role. She willingly accepted her calling to bear the Messiah. She was his first and most devoted follower, surrendering to the will of God and treasuring the opportunity to participate with her whole self.

Jesus, born of a woman, is male. The incarnation reverses Eden, where a woman came forth from a man. Both participated equally in sin, and both were found guilty.^c Now, the ultimate man is born of woman, and both of them model obedient surrender to God. As Irenaeus said, "And thus also it was that the knot of Eve's disobedience was loosed by the obedience of Mary. For what the virgin Eve had bound fast through unbelief, this did the virgin Mary set free through faith."^d This is not to say that Mary saves us, but she is a shining model for faith-filled response to the work of God.

Let's consider how his temptation changes human history. I've already written in *Bearing God's Name* about how Jesus' temptation establishes his identity by reliving Israel's story, succeeding where Israel failed.² Here I want us to think about how Jesus' resistance to temptation succeeds where Adam and Eve failed. The

author of Hebrews reflects on Jesus' relationship to the rest of humanity through this lens.

Hebrews 4:15 describes Jesus as one who "has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin." Hebrews 5:8 reinforces the parallel to the predicament of humanity when it says, "Son though he was, he learned obedience from what he suffered." As we discussed earlier, being God's image bears similarities to human kinship. Just as Adam's son Seth was his image and likeness, so humans are God's image and likeness (Genesis 5:1-3). But that status as "sons" was not fully enjoyed because of the estrangement between humans and God. The glory of that position was diminished when Adam and Eve rebelled against God's command. (Remember: their identity as God's image was not lost, but the glory that comes from living into that reality faded as they lost access to the presence of God. Glory depends on proximity.)

Just as the first humans' sin had a profound impact on the trajectory of human experience, so Jesus' ability to resist temptation opened a new future for all humans. We're told that "the Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being" (Hebrews 1:3). As a human, Jesus possesses the same identity as every other human as the image of God, but his closeness with the Father enables him to radiate glory and represent God in ways that are appropriate to that identity. The Father/Son language fills the first chapter of Hebrews, designating Jesus as God's exalted covenant partner who will rule on his behalf.

Jesus rightfully takes the throne intended for humans (see Psalm 8; Hebrews 2:5-9). In the process, he brings "many sons and daughters to glory" (Hebrews 2:10). That is, he facilitates the restoration of the family of God to a right relationship with him so we, too, can radiate God's glory.

Jesus' full humanity was essential because human mortality was part of the problem. We were subject to death because of sin (Hebrews 2:14-15). "For this reason he had to be made like them, fully human in every way, in order that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in service to God, and that he might make atonement for the sins of the people" (Hebrews 2:17). Hebrews 2:18 points to one benefit of Jesus' humanity: "Because he himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted."

Jesus' full humanity carries profound implications for us. Our bodies are not a shell to be discarded so that we can experience mystical union with God. Jesus'

incarnation—his “enfleshment”—points to the significance of our embodiment. God’s original creative act is vindicated in Jesus, who rescues the human project.

NAVIGATING EMBARRASSMENT

In light of Jesus’ full human personhood, we can take a closer look at the dimensions of his life on earth as a model for us and as a lens through which to view the creation ideal. Many Christians think of Jesus’ miracles as a public demonstration of his deity, but Jesus’ first miracle was private and affirms his humanity—and ours. Jesus attends a wedding with his disciples. To be Jesus’ disciple is to learn from him day in and day out. This time he’s teaching them how to celebrate with others. This lesson is *How to Be a Guest 101*. The disciples have left their families to follow Jesus, but he makes sure they know families are important.

In the Philippines we often heard the saying, “If you want a man to do something, ask his mother.” This points to the high esteem sons have for their mothers in Filipino culture and the resulting influence these mothers possess. As Peeler notes, Jesus’ mother, Mary, must have been a close friend or family member of the wedding party because she is privy to an embarrassing development: the hosts ran out of wine (John 2:3).³ The situation is desperate, and she sees Jesus as the best solution. As his mother, she draws him into the drama of first-century social dynamics. To run out of wine at a wedding would cast a shadow over the hospitality of the bridegroom and bring shame on him. However, Jesus expresses reluctance for his involvement to become known since he was not ready to go public with his miracles. He tenderly addresses her as “Woman,” acknowledging her humanity.⁴ Mary honors his wishes to act discreetly by sending the servants to Jesus for instructions. The best solution to this problem for everyone involved would require that it happen behind the scenes.

Jesus could have said, “It’s no big deal! People have already had plenty of wine to drink! I’m here to address more important matters.” But he didn’t. Thanks to his mother’s advocacy, Jesus enters into someone else’s problem and spares him great embarrassment. Only his disciples and the household servants are aware of what Jesus does. He turns wash water, water for outer purification, into wine for

celebration. What a moment! But he lets the bridegroom get the credit. Jesus, the true bridegroom, brings honor to this bridegroom by providing excellent wine. Though single himself, he upholds the honor of the marriage bond. Though he is the guest, he provides generously for the host without taking any credit for himself. Humanly speaking, he saves this ordinary day so that the joy of the occasion is not diminished.

Peeler says “such a sign attests that God works miraculously not just to save lives but also to make life worth living. God at times simply grants the delights of the community, and not just their needs.”⁵ In so doing, Jesus dignifies human culture and celebration.

CONFRONTING INJUSTICE

Jesus is not always so accommodating to human desires. Judging from the typical evangelical sermon or youth group lesson, you’d think that the primary Christian virtue is being “nice.” While it’s true that kindness is a fruit of the Spirit, being nice and being kind are not the same. Watching Jesus at work opens up a broader range of human relations.

I’m thinking in particular of Jesus’ response to the religious leaders of his day. He is blunt with them. Their commercial activities in the temple courts provoke a strong response.

Being human leads to being angry, at least some of the time.

What makes you angry?

Anger is a window to the soul. It tells us what matters most to us. Some of our anger is undeniably off course. If we slow down and take a look at patterns in our anger, we can sometimes see areas in our hearts that need work.

One thing that makes me angry is dysfunctional classroom technology. Frankly, my kids are tired of hearing me talk about it so passionately at the dinner table. When I stop to ask myself why it makes me angry, I discover something deeper about myself. Setting up the technology is someone else’s job, but I am responsible to run each of my classes. When it doesn’t work well, I feel exposed as incompetent and unprepared.

This particular anger is self-centered. Yuck.

But sometimes anger is appropriate. Some anger looks out for the needs of others and energizes an effective response. As I write this, Russia is invading Ukraine. Putin's aggression is alarming. We are right to be angry about the tragic loss of life and environmental degradation that result from war.

I don't know anyone in Ukraine. Still, the invasion matters to me because Scripture provides a model for responding to injustice. We know Yahweh hears the cries of the unjustly oppressed. He hears the cries of Hagar in Genesis 16:6 when Abraham and Sarah mistreat her. And he hears the cries of Abraham's descendants when the Egyptians mistreat them (Exodus 2:23-25; cf. 1:11-12). I'm confident that God hears the cries of Ukrainians. Exodus 34:6-7 says Yahweh is "slow to anger" but also that he "does not leave the guilty unpunished." God is not quick to snap at us, but he takes sin seriously. His character is a model for ours.

How does Jesus handle his anger?

John coordinates Jesus' temple cleansing with Passover (John 2:13), the high point of the Jewish calendar.⁶ Jews traveled to Jerusalem from far and wide to celebrate God's dramatic rescue of the nation from enslavement in Egypt. John invokes Psalm 69:9, which illustrates Jesus' response to the buying and selling in the temple: "zeal for your house consumes me" (John 2:17). The context of this quotation from the Psalms speaks to the isolation that comes when you are the only one who seems to care about upholding the honor of God's name (Psalm 69:8-9).

The other Gospel writers record Jesus' own words: "Is it not written: 'My house will be called a house of prayer for all nations'? But you have made it 'a den of robbers'" (Mark 11:17; cf. Matthew 21:13; Luke 19:46). These words are a composite quotation of Isaiah 56:7 and Jeremiah 7:11, two powerful passages to evoke in this context. They are the key to understanding Jesus' anger. Jesus did not wake up on the wrong side of the bed. The problem is far more serious. Jesus sees that the temple establishment had completely lost sight of its mission to bless all nations. Isaiah 56 presents a vision of just practices that reveal Yahweh's righteousness to the whole world (Isaiah 56:1). The prophet envisions foreigners—eunuchs even!—among those keeping the covenant and worshiping in the temple, bringing offerings and sacrifices (Isaiah 56:3-7).

Instead of showing generous hospitality, Jews in Jerusalem were apparently profiteering from these travelers. The exchange rates and temple markup were atrocious enough that Jesus called them theft. Their noisy buying and selling

discouraged prayer by filling the court of the Gentiles with commotion. Why hadn't the Jewish religious leaders outlawed these practices? They likely generated a tidy income.

Similarly, in Mark 12:41-44 and Luke 21:1-4, Jesus' attention to the widow who generously gave her last two cents to the temple establishment is sandwiched between his condemnation of religious leaders who "devour widow's houses" and his announcement that the temple itself will be destroyed. Jesus' anger was justified. Those in power were exploiting the generosity of women like this one. Jesus was willing to threaten the establishment to restore the temple to God's original intent. John's Gospel recognizes the cost. Jesus' action garners rejection and hostility. By evoking Jeremiah 7, Jesus implied that the entire institution was ripe for judgment.

It would be wise for us to examine our responses to anger. Does our anger align with God's own character? Is our anger on behalf of someone else? Or is it self-centered?

Given Jesus' example, we're right to feel a passionate aversion to abuses of power. Police participation in human trafficking, pastors' complicity with emotional or physical abuse, politicians' misdirection of funds to pad the pockets of supporters, adults' exploitation of children, spousal abuse, and discrimination on the basis of race, sex, or disability—these are all examples of things we should be angry about. God certainly is.

Given Jesus' example,
we're right to feel
a passionate aversion
to abuses of power.

Then we must ask the more difficult question: Who is angry at me? Is their anger justified? How am I failing to participate in God's vision of a world marked by justice, human flourishing, and environmental health?

CONFRONTING UNBELIEF

Each aspect of Jesus' ministry teaches us something about what it means to be human. Here we consider his healings. Why did Jesus heal people?

Perhaps the answer seems obvious. For most of my life, I read these stories as proof of his compassion. Jesus saw a need and met it.

However, a closer look at the way Jesus interacts with and heals people reveals a lot more. Since Jesus is the model human, we need to get this right. If we mischaracterize Jesus' healings, we could end up with a distorted view of the ideal human.

We cannot squeeze all the healing stories into a single mold. Sometimes a person requests his or her own healing, sometimes friends or family members request healing, sometimes Jesus initiates the interaction. Often the encounter involves a lesson that exposes poorly formed theology of sabbath or sin in those who observe the healing. Sometimes faith is a factor; other times it is not.

In John 9, Jesus heals a man born blind. If physical ability were the whole point of this story, the story could have ended after verse 7, when the man could see. However, the miracle involved an entire community and generated significant controversy that revolved around the identities of the blind man and Jesus.

Unbelief operates on a number of levels in this story: the neighbors don't believe that the sighted man was their formerly blind neighbor (John 9:8-9); the Pharisees don't believe Jesus came from God because he violated their Sabbath laws (John 9:13-16); the Pharisees don't believe the man was really blind (John 9:18-23); and they doubt Jesus' origin (John 9:24-29).

The man's blindness was an occasion for Jesus' public demonstration of power to reveal his messianic identity. At the same time, Jesus exposed the problematic theology of his disciples and the Jewish religious leaders. In other words, while his disciples were examining the blind man to place blame for his condition, and the religious leaders were preoccupied with trying to call Jesus a sinner, Jesus demonstrated that to be able bodied was not the ideal. Having a heart attentive to the work of God and able to recognize the Spirit was far more important.

So, yes, Jesus healed the man who had been born blind, but the point of the story is not to highlight the man's deficiency but rather to unveil Jesus' identity in light of Israel's hard-heartedness. We can see this even more clearly if we pay attention to how Isaiah factors into this story.

Isaiah was a prophet to Judah in the eighth century BCE. God gave him an unusual commission:

Make the heart of this people thick,
make their ears heavy,

and their eyes besmeared,
lest they see with their eyes,
with their ears hear,
and their hearts understand
and turn and be healed. (Isaiah 6:10, my translation)

After generations of unfaithfulness to Yahweh's covenant, Isaiah's role was to announce God's judgment. It was too late to repent. God had already sent the Assyrians to attack Israel and Judah.

But Isaiah's message was not all discouragement. He also offered glimpses of future restoration. Just as a new shoot can grow out of the stump of a felled tree, so some would survive God's judgment (Isaiah 6:13). Isaiah announced a future day of salvation in which God would return. On that day, "will the eyes of the blind be opened, / and the ears of the deaf unstopped" (Isaiah 35:5). In the midst of other signs of flourishing, the unmistakable sign of God's return to Israel would be the healing of the blind, deaf, lame, and mute.

Interpreters often wrestle over why Jesus chose to heal the man born blind in such an unusual way. Why make mud and put it on his eyes? Isaiah holds the key to this mystery. John tells us Jesus "smeared" the mud on his eyes—precisely what Isaiah was told to do to the eyes of the people of Judah (Isaiah 6:10). Jesus then "sent" (cf. Isaiah 6:8) him to Siloam to wash. Legend has it that this very pool filled with water in response to the prayer of Isaiah and that he was later buried nearby. Jesus has taken up Isaiah's ministry to fulfill it.⁷

The one who had been blind correctly identified Jesus as a "prophet" in John 9:17. When Jesus encountered him later, he announced, "For judgment I have come into this world, so that the blind will see and those who see will become blind" (John 9:39). This is precisely what happens in John 9—the blind man can see, and those who think they can see demonstrate their own spiritual blindness regarding Jesus' true identity.

The point is this: Jesus' healing of the man born blind was not just an act of compassion. Jesus was not simply "fixing" this man's problem. More importantly, he was exposing unbelief and announcing his identity as the one who had come to fulfill Isaiah's prophecies.

Similarly, when God called Moses to lead the people of Israel, Moses was troubled by his own speech impediment (Exodus 4:10; 6:12, 30). He insisted that he was not qualified for the task. God chose not to heal Moses. In fact, God told Moses that as the Creator he was well aware of his condition. His plan was not to remove Moses' disability but rather to empower Moses to complete the task to which he was called (Exodus 4:11-17). God's presence was the essential factor, not Moses' ability. God provided Aaron as Moses' spokesperson, a companion in ministry.⁸

Both stories suggest that God is neither surprised nor overwhelmed by our disabilities. We all fall along a spectrum of physical, intellectual, and social abilities. Some of these factors change over time. In fifth grade, I got glasses. I'll never forget the thrill of seeing the tippy tops of tree branches and reading the chalkboard clearly. Ten years ago I had LASIK surgery so that I could see well without glasses or contacts. At the time of the surgery, the ophthalmologist warned me that LASIK would not prevent the natural loss of vision that comes with age. He was right. After over forty years of perfect reading vision, I'm beginning to struggle with small print. Those of us who are able bodied are only temporarily so.

REVERSING IMPURITY

When we moved to the Philippines in 2002 to work as missionaries among a minority group, I soon found a whole neighborhood of eleven thousand ethnic minorities just down the road. They were united in their religion with its distinct way of life. Many of them sold wares at the market nearby. I visited their booths daily to practice language and build friendships. One of my vendor friends was pregnant. After she gave birth, I asked her friends if I could visit her to see the baby. They were surprised but welcomed me. This was the first of many visits inside the compound where they lived.

On this first visit, I broke all kinds of rules that I didn't know existed. My friends insisted I should keep my sandals on inside the house, so I did. They brought me the baby, dressed in pink and lace. I oohed and aahed and kissed the baby and said how beautiful she was. They told me her name. After they repeated it several times, I asked them to write it down for me. They searched the entire house—a three-story concrete building housing a dozen families—and could not find a pencil.

Later, as I recounted the experience with my language tutor, I discovered all the ways I had misstepped. Shoes must always be removed. Asking them to write her name shamed them by exposing their functional illiteracy. One must never kiss a baby because it could transmit germs. Instead of a kiss, I should have sucked in my breath quickly near her face. But my biggest mistake came as a shock: Babies must never be praised because this may attract the attention of demonic spirits. Instead, I should have expressed how ugly the baby was. Clearly, I had a lot to learn.

Reading the Bible is also a crosscultural experience. For example, in the ritual purity system of the Old Testament, skin diseases or body fluids make one “impure” and unable to enter the tabernacle or temple. Readers of the New Testament often assume that Jesus disregarded these ritual laws, but that’s not true. Since bodily fluids are a normal part of human experience, it will be helpful to see how Jesus handles them.

Matthew Thiessen examines Jesus’ healing miracles in light of the ritual purity system of Leviticus and concludes that Jesus addressed it head-on. He explores the three most potent types of ritual impurity: *lepra* (a type of skin disease), genital discharges, and death—showing how Jesus reverses the causes of ritual impurity to bring people from death to life. To understand what Jesus was up to, we need to grasp the basics of ritual impurity. This kind of impurity was not sinful, but it prevented access to the temple, and (in some cases) limited participation in the community. A variety of substances could cause impurity, but they were all thought to be related to death.⁹

You might be surprised to learn that dirt and blood were not problematic according to the regulations of Leviticus. Neither was snot or urine or spit. Only bodily fluids associated with procreation—menstrual blood or semen—could cause temporary ritual impurity. Although these substances have the potential of creating new life, their presence outside the body means that they did not do so.

Jesus’ healing of those experiencing ritual impurity implies that restoration of some kind was needed. Thiessen explains that Jesus’ aim was to remove the source of impurity for those suffering from long-term impurity.¹⁰ Most cases of ritual impurity lasted only a day or a week. The Gospels don’t recount any stories about Jesus removing temporary impurity. Instead, he addresses those whose impurity was ongoing and indefinite. In other words, impurity, as long as it is temporary, poses no

threat to our status as God's royal family. But persistent impurity disrupts worship and community.

Two of these healing stories are knit together in Mark 5. The first is the story of a woman with a "flow of blood" (Mark 5:25-34). Similar language is used in Leviticus 12:7 and 15:25 to describe abnormal genital discharges, so we know this is menstrual blood.¹¹ Most women can imagine the hassle of a twelve-year period, especially without disposable hygiene products. We can also commiserate with the depletion of energy that would come from a continual loss of iron-rich blood. But this woman's situation was more serious. Although in that context her predicament probably didn't make her feel guilty and would not require a quarantine, it did constrain her activities and drain her finances.¹²

From a Jewish perspective, the woman would be unable to present sacrifices in the temple. Presuming she was married, she was also not allowed to have intercourse with her husband. The prohibition against intercourse during menstruation would have prevented their union for twelve long years (or may have affected her eligibility for marriage in that cultural context). She was still in her childbearing years, but since she bled continually, she would have been unable to conceive even if she and her husband had disregarded the laws regulating intimacy. For all practical purposes, her womb was dead.

Jesus' holiness was so powerful and contagious that without his conscious knowledge he reversed her condition. Jesus addresses her as "daughter" and commends her faith (Mark 5:34). His power over the forces of death points to the possibility of unending life!

His life-giving power is even more dramatically apparent in the healing story that envelops this one. The twelve-year-old daughter of a Jewish synagogue leader is gravely ill and then dies. When Jesus brings her back to life, he demonstrates his ability to overcome permanent ritual impurity (Mark 5:22-24, 35-43). A twelve-year-old daughter experiencing the irreversible impurity of death and a daughter who suffered incurable impurity for twelve years—both restored to fullness of life!

DEATH BY CRUCIFIXION

But then, paradoxically, Jesus himself died. *Bearing God's Name* emphasized Jesus' moral example without saying much about the centrality of his crucifixion. This is what happens when we trace a single thread through Scripture. Examining that particular thread brought into focus how Jesus was faithful to the covenant as one who bore God's name with honor. We saw this reflected in the section above regarding temptation. But Jesus' obedience does not give us a complete picture of who Jesus is and what he came to do. If we view his death on the cross from only this angle, we end up with a "moral influence" theory of the atonement—that Jesus died mainly to set an example to us of self-giving love. Jesus did demonstrate his love on the cross. But he also did much more. On its own, the moral influence theory is not robust enough to communicate the fullness of what happened at Calvary.

Tracing the human thread provides a better entry point to talk about the cross. After all, death is part of the universal human experience. Our mortality is in view from the beginning of the story—from dust we came, and to dust we will return. Adam and Eve's rebellion cut off their access to the tree of life, which presumably would have enabled them to live forever.

If Jesus was to be fully human, enfleshed as we are, he would need to experience mortality, too.

But Jesus did not just die a natural death. His was the death of self-giving love. In his death, Jesus showed us what it is to be truly human. Eastern Orthodox scholar John Behr points to a famous quote from Irenaeus, "The glory of God is a living human being and the life of the human being is to see God."¹³ Ironically, Jesus shows us the glory of God by dying on purpose (see John 19:30).

Jesus' death was the culmination of humanity's purpose. He was "obedient unto death"—refusing to cling to power or autonomy (see Philippians 2:8). Faced with the same choice as the first humans, Jesus conquered sin and death by facing it head-on and receiving the judgment that humanity deserved. He did so willingly, taking on the full penalty of human rebellion as our representative.¹⁴ This act of self-sacrifice finally repairs the brokenness of the garden.

John's Gospel presents Jesus as the new Adam. Jesus' arrest occurs in a garden (John 18:1), contrasting the events in the first garden. When confronted with his sin, Adam blamed Eve (and God), and Eve blamed the serpent. In contrast, Jesus identifies himself as the one the soldiers seek and advocates for the innocence of his

companions (John 18:8). He demonstrates his trust in the Father by choosing the bitter “cup” he ordained, rather than thinking he knows better (John 18:11).

Pilate, the Roman governor, treats Jesus as a model human: “What charges are you bringing against this man?” (or “this human”; John 18:29; cf. Genesis 1:26). He discusses Jesus’ kingly status (John 18:33-37), reminding us of the first humans’ role as rulers of creation (Genesis 1:28). Pilate puts thorns on his head (John 19:2), echoing the thorns that came as a consequence of human rebellion (Genesis 3:18). Finally, Pilate clothes him (John 19:2), reminding us of God’s clothing of Adam and Eve (Genesis 3:21). While John’s terms are not all the same as those in Genesis, the cumulative effect suggests a comparison. The most striking similarity comes when he introduces Jesus to the Jews gathered, saying, “Behold, the human!” (John 19:5, my translation). David Litwa suggests that this statement alludes to Genesis 3:22, where God says of Adam, “Behold, the human became like one of us, knowing good and evil” (my translation).¹⁵

Jesus did become like one of us—fully human. He experienced both positive and negative aspects of life on earth. Jesus is the inverse of the first humans—innocent yet willing to die—while the first humans were guilty of blaming each other for choosing what leads to death.

Jesus’ death is multifaceted, pulling together many different scriptural metaphors. Many relate to sin: he pays the debt we owe, he bears the burden of our sin and takes the punishment we deserve, he sets us free from captivity to sin and death, he cleanses us from our guilt, and his death defeats Satan.

While all of these are rich metaphors that highlight truths about what Jesus has accomplished, John’s insights stand out as particularly relevant for the question of this book: What does it mean to be human? As the second Adam, Jesus relives the choice of the first humans. Rather than setting out to find his own path to glory, Jesus entrusts himself to the Father. His last act on the cross connects his own mother with John, the beloved disciple (John 19:25-27). In this way he creates a new human family, where “parent” and “child” are bound by loving commitment rather than by blood.

Jesus’ last words on the cross in John’s Gospel bring completion to his important work: “It is finished” (John 19:30).¹⁶ All this took place on the “day of Preparation, and the next day was to be a special Sabbath” (John 19:31; cf. 19:14). Just as God had finished his work of creation before the Sabbath (Genesis 2:2),

Jesus finishes his work of ushering in the new creation by fulfilling humanity's purpose through self-giving love and full obedience to God's command.

KEY IDEAS

- Jesus' incarnation powerfully underscores the significance of human embodiment in God's purposes for creation.
- Because he is born of a woman, Jesus' manhood does not reduce his ability to represent all humans.
- Jesus honored and participated in human culture and interacted with human institutions. His expressions of joy and anger validate human emotion.
- Jesus healed people's bodies for a variety of reasons without implying that those experiencing illness or disability are less human. His larger purpose was to reveal his identity and to restore relationships.
- Jesus died as the ultimate human, willingly taking on his innocent self the punishment we deserve.

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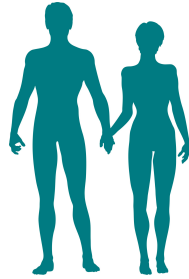
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A NEW HUMANITY



RESURRECTION

The resurrection of Jesus is the heart of this book and the heart of our faith. It's the key that unlocks the Bible's message. It's here—at the climax of Jesus' own story—that we directly encounter God's purposes for humanity. Without the resurrection, the incarnation was temporary and so is this world and so are we. The resurrection proves that creation still matters. It demonstrates that humans are still the crown of creation. It validates our physical embodiment on this planet, upholding it as something destined for restoration.

Without the resurrection, Jesus becomes just another self-proclaimed messiah. If Jesus' spirit had returned to heaven while his body remained in the tomb, then at best we'd have a disembodied faith that hopes to outlast our mortal bodies. We might picture eternity in the clouds without the trappings of arms, legs, and stomachs. But that's not what God offers. Let's take a closer look at this apex of human history to see what clues it holds for human identity.

We begin exploring the resurrection where all four Gospels begin, with the moment of discovery. The disciples were cloaked in grief, stunned by the death of the one they thought was the Messiah. Each of the Gospel writers recounts different facets of these early days of sorrow, confusion, and wonder, but all four of them tell us this: Jesus first appeared to women. We are well acquainted with the twelve male

disciples of Jesus, but women were also among Jesus' closest followers. Several of them traveled with the men, learning from Jesus and participating in his ministry in a variety of ways. It was these women who headed to Jesus' tomb early, on the first day of the week, to tend to his dead body (John 20:1). Death did not deter their devotion. He meant the world to them.

These women's discovery on the first day of the week marked the beginning of something powerfully new. In Genesis, all the days of creation end with "and there was evening, and there was morning—the ____ day" (Genesis 1:5, 8, 13, 19, 23, 31). As I mentioned in [chapter one](#), the seventh day didn't end (Genesis 2:2-3). The Sabbath was the unending day of God's rest from creative work . . . until now. At Jesus' resurrection, John signals the start of a new week, a new creation.

Mary Magdalene, a woman who had suffered much, is the first to see Jesus. He meets her in the garden where she is weeping and greets her as "Woman" (John 20:15). In that context, this reminds us of the Garden of Eden. When Eve's eyes were opened, she was ashamed and hid. Here, Mary's eyes are opened so that she can recognize Jesus.¹ Then Jesus calls her by name and commissions her to tell the other disciples that he's alive (John 20:16-18). Jesus could have appeared directly to the men, but instead he sent Mary. This moment is a beautiful restoration of creation design for partnership, contrary to first-century cultural convention. The first woman had failed in her vocation as an ally to the first man. Eve ought to have helped Adam obey God and carry out his commission in the Garden of Eden; instead, she led the way in rebellion. In Genesis 3:15, God announced that her "seed" would crush the serpent. Now Jesus, the seed of a woman, meets Mary in the garden, calls her "Woman," and appoints her as an ally in the work of proclamation.²

What was broken can be mended.

C. S. Lewis penned an imaginative book titled *The Great Divorce* about the journey from hell (i.e., earth) to heaven.³ While his placement of heaven elsewhere is problematic, one aspect of his work is intriguing and helpful for our understanding of resurrection bodies. In Lewis's imagination, people from earth are ghostly when they get to heaven, compared to

Jesus, the seed of a woman, meets Mary in the garden, calls her "Woman," and appoints her as an ally in the work of proclamation.

the steel-like qualities of that place. Grass and dew are so solid and heavy that they do not even register the weight of a human walking across them. Long-term residents of heaven are just as solid and shining. Lewis calls them “the bright ones.” In contrast, residents of earth are wispy and insubstantial. His point is clear: heaven is more physical than earth, not less. What we take to be real is merely a shadow of what is to come.

When the disciples meet the resurrected Jesus, he is physically present. The grave is empty. The good news is not merely that Jesus lives on in our hearts after his death. It’s not that his spirit has been released so that he’s more alive than before; Jesus is who he was—embodied. When Jesus appeared anew to the women, they “clasped his feet” (Matthew 28:9). The good news is that Jesus is physically present with them again—alive! They could touch him.

But Jesus also has superpowers. He can appear and disappear, walking through locked doors (John 20:19). I doubt that this is because he is God. He was God as he walked with his disciples, but he had never pulled this trick before. I suspect (though I can’t prove it) that his resurrection body is so solid that doors and walls become as insubstantial as the ghostly shadows of Lewis’s fictional hell. Jesus’ resurrected body offers a glimpse of our own future bodies.

John tells us that on that first day of new creation, Jesus commissioned his disciples: “‘Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.’ And with that he breathed on them and said, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit’” (John 20:21-22). Just as God had breathed into the first human to make him a “living being” (Genesis 2:7), now Jesus breathes into his disciples to commission and empower them to fulfill their human vocation as God’s representatives.

THE FLESH

In light of the resurrection and ascension of Jesus, how should we think about our own bodies? It’s true that Paul has a lot of negative things to say about “the flesh,” and we’ll get to that later, but let’s not leave the resurrection too quickly. We have more to notice first.

When Jesus appeared to his disciples in his resurrected body, he said, “Look at my hands and my feet. It is I myself! Touch me and see; a ghost does not have flesh

and bones, as you see I have” (Luke 24:39). The disciples still struggled to comprehend what had happened so Jesus proved his bodily resurrection by eating “a piece of broiled fish” (Luke 24:42). Jesus’ resurrected body could process nutrients. After more than forty-eight hours, he must have been very hungry indeed!

We spoke earlier about Jesus’ healing ministry and how important it is that we understand what he’s up to because of the implications for humanity. This is why we can’t miss Jesus’ scars. Thomas isn’t with the disciples when Jesus first appears to them. He refuses to believe the rumors. He knows that Jesus’ body had been mutilated on the cross. He needs proof that the same body lives again (John 20:24-25). Jesus appears again to his disciples and invites Thomas to touch his scars: “Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side” (John 20:27). Jesus still bears the scars of his crucifixion.

The implications of this moment are profound. Jesus’ glorification did not erase the evidence of his suffering. As Stephanie Tait notes, Jesus’ wounds are gaping—large enough for Thomas’s hand to fit inside.⁴ Perhaps we need to rethink the notion of being given “a new body” in the new creation. Jesus has the same body—one that was beaten and pierced—yet he experiences resurrection life. The continuity between his incarnation and resurrection body suggests that we, too, will be our embodied selves in the new creation.

I will be myself in the resurrection. You’ll be able to recognize me. Will I have scars—the incision for my C-section, the zigzag on my back where my birthmark was removed, the slash across my left toe where I tripped and landed on the metal edging in the lawn? I expect I will. They are, after all, part of my humanity. I’m speculating, but we’re told directly that Jesus eats and Jesus has scars. This surprises me because, like many of you, I grew up imagining that we wouldn’t need bodies in heaven, or that our bodies would be unscathed by life on earth.

Jesus’ glorification did not erase the evidence of his suffering.

If our bodies are good and if they will endure, then why does Paul consistently refer to “the flesh” as a problem? For Paul, “the flesh” is shorthand for, as James Dunn puts it, “a life lived solely at the animal level of satisfying merely human appetites and desires.”⁵ Paul recognizes that sin twists human desire for our own ends. Instead of living into our true identity as God’s image, expressing self-giving

love for one another, we look out for ourselves. In his letter to the Colossians, Paul compares our sinful flesh to the flap of skin removed during circumcision. It's not that our bodies are bad; we simply need to remove the sin that's spurred on by evil desires so we can reflect God's glory to the world (Colossians 2:11; 3:5; cf. Ephesians 4:22).

Earlier we spoke of how Eve's rebellion is answered by Mary Magdalene's commissioning in the garden. Paul invites us to compare Adam and Jesus in a similar way. Adam's sin resulted in death for humanity as a whole, while Jesus' obedience to death restores humanity to the life God intended from the start—a life in which we reign with him (Romans 5:17). We enter this life by identifying with his death and resurrection in tangible ways (Romans 6:5). One key way to participate in the death of Christ is by killing our selfish desires (Romans 8:13; Colossians 3:5). The key is not to ignore those desires but to surrender them in the presence of God, asking him to breathe into us the Spirit's empowerment to live out of our true identity. As Paul writes, “If you live according to the flesh, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the misdeeds of the body, you will live” (Romans 8:13). The life Paul envisions is not disembodied but transformed. He has just said that “he who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies because of his Spirit who lives in you” (Romans 8:11).

N. T. Wright notes that “Paul speaks of the future resurrection as a major motive for treating our bodies properly in the present time (1 Corinthians 6:14).”⁶ He's right. Our physical bodies matter because God created them to last.⁷ This insight should transform how we treat ourselves as well as others. Remember, at creation God did not tell humans to subdue each other. The first humans were to work in glorious harmony, carrying out their vocation together. In our lived experience, such partnership is rarer than it should be. All too often, humans dominate and subjugate each other, inflicting pain and violating others' human dignity.

What happens to those whose bodies have been used and abused by others? What does Jesus' resurrection offer for people whose dignity has been violated? If you've experienced physical, verbal, or emotional abuse, you are not alone. Jesus was abused so violently that it killed him. But at the cross, with his dying breaths, Jesus models relinquishment of vengeance—“Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing”—as he entrusts his broken and abused body to the Father (Luke 23:34, 46). After his resurrection, his scars remain, but his body has

passed through death to an imperishable and glorious life. That life is available to every person—including you—who entrusts their life to God.

If someone is abusing you, reach out for help and seek safety. You deserve to be treated with dignity. But know this: no one can take away your dignity as God's image. You have agency over your life and your actions. Your choices and outlook on life make a difference, not only to your own well-being but also to those around you. Your whole self matters to God, including your body, and he will redeem it. You may have scars, but your resurrection body will be glorious!

ASCENSION

The ascension of Jesus might be the most neglected aspect of the gospel message. We talk about how Jesus died for our sins and how he rose again from the dead, but unless we're reciting a creed, we rarely mention that he ascended. However, this movement in Jesus' story is essential because it affirms his ongoing humanity. A human is now a member of the Trinity!⁸ As the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* explains, "Christ's ascension marks the definitive entrance of Jesus' humanity into God's heavenly domain."⁹

When Jesus ascends, he takes his place on the throne. "Being seated at the Father's right hand signifies the inauguration of the Messiah's kingdom."¹⁰ He reigns not only over one nation but over the whole earth. For Jesus to reign on his heavenly throne evokes a host of biblical passages about God's anointed one: Psalm 2 is a prime example. Psalm 2 indicates that God's anointed king possesses authority to rule the nations of the earth. It warns those nations to submit to his rule, or they will be judged severely. This is another reason the ascension is so important. Without it, Jesus lacks the authority to judge the nations.

Judgment may not seem like good news, but it is! Judgment means setting things right and restoring their proper order and function. A just criminal conviction does not bring healing on its own, but it still brings a measure of relief. When perpetrators are held accountable, the world can breathe more easily.

Jesus' ascent also allows him to serve as high priest in the heavenly temple, making his intercession and atonement for human sin perpetually available.¹¹ Temple worship in Jerusalem was effective but limited in scope. Temple sacrifices

expressed true thankfulness or freewill offering, fulfilled vows, and cleansed the community from accidental sin, but did not resolve the conditions that led to sin in the first place.¹² Jesus' self-giving sacrifice was qualitatively different. His resurrection and ascension mean that "because Jesus lives forever, he has a permanent priesthood. Therefore he is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them" (Hebrews 7:24-25). His is "the power of an indestructible life" (Hebrews 7:16).

Jesus' ascension is the hinge in the Gospel story that prompts his commissioning of his disciples. He leaves so they can experience the gift of the Spirit. In John 20:22, after his resurrection, Jesus breathed on his disciples, telling them, "Receive the Holy Spirit." This act echoes Genesis 2:7, where the Lord God breathes life into the first human and "the man became a living being." Now, animated by the Spirit of God, Jesus' followers are more fully and consistently empowered to do the work to which he has called them.

If we miss Jesus' ascension, we run the risk of overspiritualizing his ongoing ministry as well as our own. At the ascension, Jesus passed the baton to the church to bring the gospel to all nations, inviting others into the beloved community. From his heavenly throne, he continues to oversee our work, to intercede for us, and to empower our ministry through the gift of the Spirit.

During our years as missionaries in the Philippines, we served on a team with a well-known missionary couple. Phil and Julie Parshall had already spent twenty years in Bangladesh before they moved to the Philippines to mobilize and equip the Filipino church to reach out to their Muslim neighbors.

Phil is a tall, educated White man from the United States. Although they lived simply in Manila, he was wealthy by Filipino standards. His head of white hair automatically granted him deep respect by his Filipino colleagues. When we arrived in the Philippines, he and Julie had already been there for almost twenty years. If we gathered with our Filipino coworkers for prayer, you could feel the electricity in the room when Phil entered. No matter who was supposed to lead the meeting, out of deep respect they would automatically defer to Phil when he entered the room. Filipino Christians were doing strategic, self-sacrificial work in challenging locations. They knew the language and culture. But when Phil walked in, they fell silent.

Shortly after we returned to the United States to work at our mission's headquarters, Phil and Julie retired and moved back home too. Almost immediately, the energy shifted. Filipino leaders stepped up with great new initiatives, and we began hearing stories of real spiritual fruit. The Parshalls played a crucial role in recruitment to the work, but leaving allowed that work to gain momentum. Their vision fueled a generation of new missionaries, but their departure made space for new degrees of Filipino ownership and initiative.

Jesus' ascension had a similar effect on his disciples. Without him in the room, each one accepted the responsibility to step up and act in his name and carry out his work.

Scripture tells us that Jesus will return in the same way he departed—bodily and visibly—to bring his kingdom reign to earth (Acts 1:11). He returns as judge to vindicate the righteous and condemn the wicked. This fact elevates the importance of every act in human history. Our work matters because Jesus will weigh it to assess its quality and distribute responsibilities accordingly.

FROM DEATH TO LIFE

Many evangelicals in North America are unfamiliar with the historic church calendar. We still celebrate Christmas, Good Friday, and Easter, but the consumer calendar has replaced nearly everything else. Where is Epiphany? Lent? Palm Sunday? Maundy Thursday? Ascension Day? They've moved aside to make room for Superbowl Sunday, Valentine's Day, Mother's Day, and Halloween.

One holy day that we would do well to recover is Ash Wednesday. Ash Wednesday marks the beginning of Lent, a forty-day period of fasting (not counting Sundays) in preparation for Easter. Typically, the officiant smears ashes on the forehead of each worshiper in the shape of a cross, saying "From dust you came, and to dust you will return" (cf. Genesis 3:19).

In the swirl of daily activities that take on an air of self-importance, Ash Wednesday reminds us of our mortality. We are not as indispensable as we think. Yes, our work matters, but our bodies will one day turn to dust. We are creatures in need of transformation and renewal if we are to last for eternity.

Ash Wednesday also marks a necessary period of self-examination and repentance. Because of our sin, we fall short of God's glory. We fail to represent God well on earth. We bear the weight of others' failures to do the same. Ash Wednesday serves as an annual reminder of our mortality and need for contrition. But here's the silver lining to this bleak message: ashes are wonderful fertilizer. Our death to self nourishes a new season of fruitfulness.¹³

Although it's somewhat rare for evangelical churches to observe Ash Wednesday, most have retained the practices of Communion and baptism. Regular participation in Communion (or the Eucharist) reminds us of Jesus' embodiment and our physical dependence on him. We taste Jesus' physical sacrifice on our behalf. We collectively take time to humble ourselves in repentance. The beautiful result is that we become part of his self-giving body—after all, we are what we eat!¹⁴

Baptism is a once-in-a-lifetime act of repentance that symbolizes our death to self and our entry point into the community of faith. Being raised from the water to new life demonstrates our rebirth in the Spirit that enables us to commune with God and each other (Ephesians 1:13). Just as a seed must be buried to grow and bear fruit, so we are buried in baptism to experience a spiritual resurrection.¹⁵ In John, Jesus describes this spiritual rebirth as being “born again” or “born from above” (John 3:3-8).¹⁶ Jesus explains, “Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit” (John 3:6). I'll talk later about the community of faith formed by the Spirit, but here I want to linger on our communion with God made possible by the Spirit's presence in us.

Theologian John Hammett agrees that our status as those who are made in the image of God does not require a particular IQ or set of skills and cannot be lost, but he suggests that this status includes a capacity for relationship with God in the Spirit.¹⁷ This capacity is deadened in those who are not united with Christ, but once we are made alive it cannot be lost, even in cases of debilitating illness or disability.

While Genesis does not say this outright, I've been pondering how it can be true. Our kinship with God, implied by our identity as the *imago Dei*, signifies that we are meant to relate with God. This seems to be true no matter our level of consciousness. People who go into a coma or have a near-death experience sometimes return with stories of deep spiritual connection with God that took place during loss of consciousness.

James Houston is the founder of Regent College in Vancouver, BC. As I write this, he's approaching his hundredth birthday. Jim is a time capsule—he was a personal friend of C. S. Lewis! Three years ago, Jim hosted me and several others in his living room to discuss the launch of a new book series. He was ninety-six at the time. When I asked him what projects he's working on, Jim listed six books he would like to complete before he dies. (I count at least four that have since been released, so apparently it's been a productive few years!) After a lifetime as an academic, writing dozens of books on the spiritual life and speaking to innumerable crowds, the pace of his life has slowed to a crawl. Jim is in long-term care as I write this. His children are publishing his letters on a blog they created. Now cut off from the libraries that have fueled his quest to learn and the colleagues that have nourished vigorous conversation, Jim writes about how God is meeting him in his dreams. Although his physical capacities are winding down, Jim's capacity to commune with God is alive and well. I trust that even if Jim loses the ability to articulate it, as long as he has life his spirit will still commune with God.

FIRSTFRUIT

Death is not the final word. When Jim dies, as we all will someday, Christian hope insists that the best is yet to come. N. T. Wright says: "Genuine Christian hope, rooted in Jesus's resurrection, is the hope for God's renewal of all things, for his overcoming of corruption, decay, and death, for his filling of the whole cosmos with his love and grace, his power and glory."¹⁸ That is a breathtaking vision.

This is not all there is. The best is yet to come. But how can we be certain?

Easter morning is our glittering signpost. The resurrection of Jesus was not the end game. It was only the beginning. His resurrection is the signal of what's to come for every child of God. As Paul wrote to the Corinthian believers,

Christian hope insists that
the best is yet to come.

If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied.

But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruit of those who have fallen asleep. For since death came through a man, the resurrection of the dead comes

also through a man. For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive. (1 Corinthians 15:19-22, adapted NIV)

What does it mean that the resurrected Messiah is the “firstfruit”? If you plant a summer garden, the firstfruit is the first ripe tomato or the first leaves of lettuce or cucumber ready to eat. Those first vegetables are a sign of much more to come. Although the first ripe fruit is exciting, no one plants a garden to get one tomato. Neither does God. By calling Christ’s resurrected body a firstfruit, Paul implies that his resurrection is not a unique, one-time event, but a taste of what is in store for every believer. There will be many more tomatoes. We are the harvest that is yet to come. You and I will rise again, too, when Jesus returns in all his glory.

This is good news because none of us has experienced the fulfillment of God’s purposes for our lives. We were born to commune with the God who made us and to express his rule in life-giving ways. But we have been selfish. We have been thick headed, failing to recognize how the Spirit was calling us to participate in kingdom work. We have missed opportunities. And even when we haven’t, our work has not had its full intended effect. Our children have rebelled. Our students have fallen asleep. Our projects have not all succeeded. Our vision for transformation has met resistance. Others have mistreated us. We have neither loved well nor been loved well. This is why we need resurrection. Richard Middleton insists that “resurrection is grounded in the reversal of injustice.”¹⁹ This is such good news. The story of our lives needs a much happier ending.

If the end goal was for us to escape this planet and fly to another dimension, then we wouldn’t need bodies, and we should all be hoping to die as soon as possible. But since we will have bodies, we can and must do away with the distorted vision of a future in which we float around like ghosts on puffy, white clouds.

Paul makes clear that our destiny is not to be ghosts. He explains,

We will not all sleep [that is, die], but we will all be changed—in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. For the perishable must clothe itself with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality. (1 Corinthians 15:51-53)

Something will happen to our physical bodies—even those that have been destroyed by fire or flood or decay—that will upgrade them so we are capable of living forever. The death-dealing rebellion of Adam and Eve will give way to the life-giving Spirit of the resurrected Christ in us. This is how Paul sees it. He says, “Just as we have borne the image of the earthly man, so shall we bear the image of the heavenly man” (1 Corinthians 15:49). In other words, our capability of functioning as God’s image will not only continue, but it will be enhanced. Our human vocation will not be set aside but rather continue in exciting new ways.

But Jesus’ resurrection is not only good news for us personally; it’s good news for the future of this created world. By rising again in the flesh, Jesus demonstrates God’s commitment to this physical world, affirming that creation still matters. And if this creation still matters, then we still have a job to do.

KEY IDEAS

- Jesus’ physical resurrection indicates God’s ongoing purposes for embodied humans on earth. His commissioning of Mary with the news of his resurrection affirms God’s intentions for the partnership of men and women in gospel ministry.
- Jesus’ scars underscore the continuity between our present bodies and our resurrected bodies.
- Jesus’ ascension inaugurates his ministry as judge and as high priest, and it empowers us to carry on his work.
- Our mortality is a signpost on the way to a future in which all will be restored.

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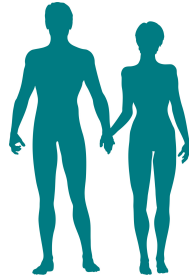
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THE BELOVED COMMUNITY



LIFE TOGETHER

Being human was complicated in the first century.

In his letter to the Ephesians, Paul unveils the dramatic new reality in which every follower of Jesus participates. To appreciate his message, we need a sense of his context. He's speaking to a world divided by language, class, ethnicity, citizenship, and gender. Roman society was strictly hierarchical, with carefully prescribed rights, privileges, and duties for slaves, freedmen and women, and those born free. Under Roman rule, not everyone was a citizen. Even those born free were stratified by wealth, with three levels of aristocrat above those of low birth. Rome had no middle class.

Jews related to Roman rule in a variety of ways, from violent resisters to collaborators and everything in between. Under Jewish law, not everyone had access to the temple. Women were barred from approaching the altar, and Gentiles were kept out completely with an ornate wall. Many Jews maintained a distinct identity marked by a different diet that prevented table fellowship with non-Jews. Their festivals and even their weekly calendar meant that they were always marching to the beat of a different drum.

These two larger categories—Roman and Jewish—were not mutually exclusive but rarely overlapped. Into the mix add diverse languages (Greek, Latin, Aramaic,

Syriac, Hebrew, etc.) and social roles—master, slave, freedperson; patron and client; wealthy and those of low birth.¹

With this in mind, Paul's letter holds far more intrigue. He begins with a lavish description of how Christ has blessed "us" (Ephesians 1:3-12). If we're not careful, we could easily misunderstand Paul. His "us" does not include Gentiles. He's describing how God has blessed the Jews in Christ—chosen, adopted, redeemed, forgiven, enlightened. In Ephesians 1:13, he finally includes the Gentiles: "And you also were included in Christ when you heard the message of truth." In Paul's lifetime, he's seen a shocking new development. The spiritual benefits of being Jewish are now available to anyone who trusts in Christ. This is truly revolutionary.

Paul's entire letter to the Ephesians works out what this new development means for life together. Using a striking metaphor, he calls the church—Jew and Gentile alike—the body of Christ. This is a well-worn metaphor to us, but imagine hearing it for the first time! Paul doesn't avoid the issue of the antagonism running through the community. He addresses it head-on:

Remember that formerly you who are Gentiles by birth and called "uncircumcised" by those who call themselves "the circumcision" (which is done in the body by human hands)—remember that at that time you were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world. (Ephesians 2:11-12)

Paul flags the derogatory slurs that have contributed to animosity between these groups. At the same time he dismantles them—how could an elective surgery performed by humans afford anyone greater dignity? While Roman citizenship is the prize of Paul's day, here he highlights another kind of citizenship—membership in the covenant people. This status has been out of reach for Gentiles.

Against this backdrop, Paul presents the good news:

But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ.

For he himself is our peace, who has made the two groups one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility. (Ephesians 2:13-14)

In the family of the crucified Messiah, people are no longer divided. The wall in the temple to keep impurity away from sacred space had become a greater social divide fueled by hostility.² Paul says those days are over.

Why did Jesus come? Paul says, “His purpose was to create in himself one new humanity out of the two, thus making peace, and in one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility” (Ephesians 2:15-16).

We can’t approach God without approaching each other. Christ’s work on the cross did not just address the fracture in humanity’s relationship with God. It addressed our horizontal brokenness. The gospel is not only about our eternal destiny. It transforms society right now, restoring us to what God intended for humanity.

The rest of Paul’s letter gives practical examples:

- Mutual submission (Ephesians 5:21)
- Wives who carry out household duties as an act of worship (Ephesians 5:22-24)
- Husbands who follow Christ’s example by serving their wives instead of domineering (Ephesians 5:25-33)
- Parent/child relationships marked by honor and sound instruction instead of abuse and rebellion (Ephesians 6:1-4)
- Slaves addressed as moral agents whose work matters to God and who will be rewarded (Ephesians 6:5-8)
- Masters called to lead with respect rather than violent coercion, and who are held accountable by God (Ephesians 6:9)³

We might wish that Paul had erased these hierarchies altogether, but instead he illustrates how the gospel transforms relationships formerly marked by hostility. Greco-Roman households were governed by clear expectations, including the patron-client dynamic by which those who provided protection and other benefits for another earned that person’s loyalty. Paul turns this on its head by demonstrating that dependence goes both ways. Men are the source of life for women (see Genesis 2:21-22), but every man since Adam comes from a woman (1 Corinthians 11:12). Men are to be like Christ (Ephesians 5:23) as women are to bring the kind of aid that God does (Genesis 2:18). This radical interdependence is to be expressed in mutual submission (Ephesians 5:21).⁴

Every follower of Christ, no matter their status in Roman society, is a full member of the Christian community. Paul calls every believer to treat others with respect and dignity. This bold vision subverts social structures by challenging the status quo. Paul's challenge is urgently needed in our day as we confront the realities of racism, sexism, neglect or abuse of the vulnerable, and abuses of power in the church.

EMBODIMENT

A popular cartoon during my childhood in the 1980s was *The Jetsons*, a futuristic family sitcom. While flying around on personal spaceships seemed far-fetched, I expected that within my lifetime we'd have flying cars. What seemed even more impossible to me was the family's ability to video chat live with each other—like a telephone, only with video. Preposterous! I would not have guessed that even my parents would have the technology to video chat within their lifetime.

When the Covid-19 pandemic took hold of the world, a host of creative new ways to connect arose out of necessity. Zoom and other video conferencing platforms made it possible for us to see and hear each other in real time across the miles, *Jetsons*-style. But while this technology was a tremendous gift, it left us longing for physical presence. We are three-dimensional beings, capable of communicating in a myriad of ways beyond facial expressions and tone of voice—our posture relative to each other, our dress, our scent, and our touch. Full-bodied engagement simply cannot be replaced by a Zoom call. Babies must be held. Hands must be squeezed. Food must be shared. Gifts must be given. Our embodiment facilitates community.

Perhaps the most disorienting part of the pandemic was online church. Some no doubt celebrated being able to sleep in on Sunday and tune in to the service from their recliner wearing pajamas. But the whole experience forced us to reconsider the point of Sunday worship. If the purpose of our meetings is to teach or convey information, that can happen just as well on YouTube. But church is a whole lot more than that. Something happens when I show up to church and see you there. Gathering reminds us that we are in this together; we belong to one another.

Practically speaking, we can't baptize someone on the other side of a screen. And we can't pass the Communion elements to one another. Grabbing our own cup of grape juice and cracker at home is not the same.

A few years ago, we began the school year with a special chapel Communion service. I was asked to serve Communion. I stood at the front of the auditorium and held the tray of broken crackers. Everyone on my side of the auditorium filed past to take a cracker. To each one, by name if possible, I said, "The body of Christ, given for you."

That experience wrecked me. There I was, serving Communion as if I were a professional Christian, but I was undone. It was the most profoundly leveling experience I have had in a worship service. I knew most of these people. Some were profoundly broken. This one's parents were going through a messy divorce. That one was living with chronic pain. This one was wrestling with mental health challenges.

For each one, Christ died.

And then there were those I didn't like very well. (Is it okay to admit this?) To offer them Christ meant that I had to put aside our petty differences, nursed grudges, personal preferences. It meant I had to forgive the student who plagiarized an assignment last week as well as the coworker who regularly scowled at me. *The body of Christ, broken for you.* Every single person who filed past was a person for whom Christ had given himself wholly, completely, unreservedly. Why hadn't I done the same?

Sharing the body and blood of our Lord unites us powerfully. We discover that we are not alone. Whether we like it or not, we are in this together. Being together in person, with two-way communication makes this impossible to ignore. Church is not a spectator sport. We are a family.

Not only do our individual bodies (in person) make community possible, but Scripture describes us corporately using bodily terms. We are "the body of Christ."

We are "in Christ." Christ is our "head." Part of our human identity is bound up with each other. To be human is to depend on one another, to belong to one another.

Sharing the body
and blood of our Lord
unites us powerfully.

If Christ is the perfect image of God, the one who embodies all that this identity was meant to entail, then for us to be “in Christ” is to lean into our human vocation.

RECONCILED

Unity at the Lord’s table, the way I’ve described it, is only possible when we confront our own failure to love well. It does no good to pretend we hold no ill will toward others, no prejudice or grudge. What if you had been in my shoes, serving Communion to a whole congregation? Would you shrink back from offering anyone the body of Christ?

Paul says Christian maturity hinges on “unity in the faith” (Ephesians 4:13). Christ has only one body. If we want to attain “to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ” in our fellowship, we must find a way to love one another well (Ephesians 4:13). Part of this task is learning to receive every other believer as a gift from God to our community. We usually talk about spiritual gifts as something that individuals possess, but in Ephesians 4 Paul describes the people themselves as the gifts: “Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up” (Ephesians 4:11-12). He didn’t give gifts *to* individuals; believers *are* his gifts for the community. He says this to a church no longer divided by ethnicity.

Paul declares that believers have been given the new creation ministry of “reconciliation”—imploring others to be reconciled to God (2 Corinthians 5:18-20). The word *reconciliation* can be problematic with regard to race. Some feel that it implies a return to a fictional wholeness. After all, when in history have there been harmony and mutual respect between people of different ethnicities? I share this concern, but I am retaining the word reconciliation because of its importance in New Testament theology. The unity we seek in our Christian fellowship is the one God has always intended. Just as Paul’s ministry of reconciling people to God does not imply that these people were once rightly related to God and now must be restored, so the ministry of racial reconciliation need not assume that we’re returning to a golden age of race relations. The restoration we seek is the one God had in mind from the beginning, even if it has not yet been realized.

RECKONING WITH RACISM⁵

The history of racism in America is undeniably awful. What troubles me most about it is the participation of Christians. Until recently I had assumed that lynching happened under the cover of darkness, with murderous faces of a few extremists obscured by white hoods. Community leaders by day—elected officials, doctors, judges, businesspeople, pastors even—and the ghosts of White supremacy by night.

I've since learned that in some communities lynching was a spectator sport, highly publicized and attended by whole families, young and old alike, who jeered as victims—some of whom were children—were openly burned, beaten, and hung, “crucified” outside of court without a trial. Gawkers brought picnic lunches. They wore their Sunday best and bought postcards to send to those who missed the big event. Some lynchings drew massive crowds. Many happened on church property after the service to ensure big crowds, and they pulled Bible passages out of context to legitimize their abominable behavior.

Clearly, the Emancipation Proclamation did not abolish the narratives that allowed slavery to flourish. Like water running downhill, when blocked those narratives simply changed course, finding new and insidious ways to channel White fear and subjugate Black Americans.^a Black people could no longer be owned, but many Whites still did not consider them fully human, and beat them down in a thousand other ways. Curfews. Segregation. Discrimination. Abuse with impunity. They denied them services. They barred their access to education, health care, the right to vote or hold office, the right to buy or rent housing. They lynched them.

Lynching outlasted slavery, racism gathering speed as it flowed downhill.

Lynching outlasted legalized segregation.

Just as the end of slavery was not the end of racial injustice, so the decline of lynchings did not result in equality. James Cone writes that in the early 1950s “spectacle lynching was on the decline,” but racial discrimination was merely brought indoors under the guise of the law, replacing White mobs with all-White juries, judges, and lawyers who “used the criminal justice system to intimidate, terrorize, and murder blacks.”^b Until the mid-1970s, sundown towns dotted the American landscape. In such towns Black persons risked their lives by being out after dark. And this was not only a problem in the South. DuPage County, Illinois, and towns in Oregon such as Medford, Grants Pass, and Oregon City were all sundown towns, along with California cities such as Glendale, Pasadena, Cerritos, Santa Ana, and Whittier.

Still today the uneven application of the death penalty illustrates that we have a long way to go to ensure that our justice system is truly just. Consider these statistics, cited by the Death Penalty Information Center.^c

- Jurors in Washington state are three times more likely to recommend a death sentence for a Black defendant than for a White defendant in a similar case.

- In Louisiana, the odds of a death sentence were 97 percent higher for those whose victim was White than for those whose victim was Black.
- A study in California found that those convicted of killing Whites were more than three times as likely to be sentenced to death as those convicted of killing Blacks and more than four times more likely as those convicted of killing Latinos.

These are hard facts to swallow, especially considering how recent they are. We're no longer talking about the decades before we were born. These studies reflect the reality of the 2000s. The narratives of White superiority under which slavery and then lynching became part of our American past have not yet been entirely replaced. They have simply found other means of expression. We still suffer from what Willie James Jennings calls a "diseased social imagination" in need of radical transformation.^d We urgently need to reform this vision with one rooted in the Bible's teaching on the image of God. Every human being bears dignity by virtue of his or her identity as God's image.

Martin Luther King Jr. called 11:00 a.m. on Sundays the most segregated hour of the week. We have a long way to go before our society as a whole views every person as a Somebody worth engaging as a fellow member of what King called "the beloved community."^e Almost 2000 years after Paul's letter to the Ephesians, his message of reconciliation is still urgently needed. Until the body of Christ is truly *one* body, we have not fully embraced the gospel message.

FULL INCLUSION

Race is not the only area in which the church has not done well. Disability is another.

It was 1991 or thereabouts. My dad's cousin had come for a visit, and we had the glorious opportunity of bringing Jane to church with us. We had recently made a major church transition—from Christian Reformed to Non-denominational charismatic. Our new church had lively worship, dancing in the aisles, prophetic words, and (cue dramatic music) healing prayer. The latter was of particular interest to us because Jane had been in a car accident as a teenager and was a quadriplegic.

Everyone loved Jane. She was the glue that held the extended family together. Her penmanship was stellar, even without the use of her hands. She carefully held her pens in her mouth to write letters that were pages long. She drew incredible art with her mouth—beautiful enough to print and sell as greeting cards. Jane was

keeper of memories, planner of reunions, and our family's favorite destination in Southern California.

Although it was thirty years ago, I can still vividly remember our drive with her to church. I was utterly convinced that Jane would leave church walking on her own two feet. All the way to church my brother and I gushed about what the Holy Spirit would do. We couldn't wait to witness a miracle!

I was only fourteen or so at the time. Chalk it up to immaturity, but I never once considered how our effusive faith might have felt to Jane. It never occurred to me that our excitement might have been painful or awkward to her. I never wondered what would happen to her faith or to ours if she didn't walk out of that service. Unlike Jesus, I never asked her if she wanted to be healed.

God didn't heal her that day. She left on wheels. A few days later, a group of Christians approached and surrounded her wheelchair in public and asked if they could pray for healing. It was then I realized how awkward it must be to have so much attention from well-meaning people, even strangers, who wanted to "fix" her broken body.

I spoke earlier about Jesus' healing ministry and how it's not as simple as I once thought.

Pastor Bethany McKinney Fox had a vision for a church that would include people with a wide range of abilities and disabilities, so she started one. Experience has taught her that accessibility of Sunday services is only the first step. True inclusion involves not just presence but participation at every level, even in leadership. Making sure that people with diverse needs can participate fully requires far more thought and planning, and it may require us to radically change the way we operate. It's essential to invite those experiencing disability into that process.

Far more people than we realize experience disabilities. Aside from the obvious signs such as wheelchairs, walkers, or canes are less obvious disabilities such as hearing loss, autism, social anxiety, chronic pain, IBS, or celiac disease. Last Sunday, I noticed that our son was reading song lyrics from the printed program rather than the screen up front. When I asked him why, he said the screen was blurry. (I guess it's time for glasses.) At that moment, I gained a new appreciation for the printed program.

I was stunned to learn recently that Christian schools and churches are exempt from the Americans with Disabilities Act, which sets standards of accessibility for

public buildings and institutions.⁶ When the ADA was becoming law, the Association for Christian Schools fought hard not to have to comply, citing the financial strain it would cause to remodel aging facilities. Lawmakers extended the exemption to churches and parachurch organizations as well. The result is that Christian institutions are among the least accessible buildings in this country. Christians ought to be leading the way in putting others' needs first. Why are we the last ones to prioritize care for others?

DISABILITY AND THE IMAGE

Colton appeared in chapter two of *Bearing God's Name* in a hypothetical illustration about chores. What I didn't tell you then is that Colton is a special kid. I didn't know him well when I mentioned him in the first book. I know him much better now. Most days, when I return home from work, Colton is waiting in the cul-de-sac, clipboard in hand. I open my window and roll to a stop, and he asks me about my day and whether I wrote about him yet in my next book (today I can finally say yes!). Colton typically checks to see whether I have any Covid symptoms and makes a note on his clipboard. He usually lets me know what my husband made for dinner.

Colton is eighteen years old and taller than I am. You can often find him outside setting up his own Home Hardware store, directing imaginary forklifts (complete with sound effects) to drop their loads where he can keep an eye on them. When he's not supervising his store, Colton rides a pedal bike around the neighborhood cleaning up trash from the park and the alleyways. On snowy days, he's often out with his snow shovel, clearing not just his driveway but the whole street too since it may be weeks before the town snowplow makes it to our end of town. Most days after school he shows up at our house to help Daniel with chores. They clean the garage together or mop the kitchen floor or do yard work. When we go on a trip, we are guaranteed a few phone calls from Colton to check on us—where we are, what the weather is like, and when we'll be home.

Colton's reading is getting better inch by inch. He'll likely memorize this entire page and repeat it back to me. Every neighborhood should have a guy like Colton. He's done as much as any other resident of Three Hills to make this feel like home. He checks on all the neighbors. It was Colton who first told us that our neighbor on the next street over had died of a heart attack.

If we understand the image of God to be a particular capacity for rationality or rulership, a significant portion of the population will be disqualified due to their perceived weaknesses in those areas. However, doing life together with persons with disability offers its own kind of grace. These friendships teach us how to be comfortable in our weaknesses. Rather than sites of frustration, our weaknesses become sites that show our need for others—and thus sites of camaraderie. Colton reminds me not to take myself too seriously. He's ready to celebrate with me whether I wrote fifty words or five hundred.

BECOMING WHO WE ARE

Perhaps you've heard the story of the eagle who was hatched by a turkey. As the story goes, a farmer found an unusual egg in one of his turkey's nests and left it there to let it hatch. To his surprise, it was an eagle! However, the eaglet had no one to teach him how to be an eagle. Instead, he learned from his adoptive mother how to peck at grain and waddle around the barnyard.

One day an eagle flew down and perched near the pen and saw the eagle among the turkeys. Baffled, he asked the eagle why it didn't fly away. The young eagle was startled to see a bird that looked like him. "I didn't know I could fly!" he replied. The mature eagle gave the young one lessons, and soon he flew away. Knowing who he was and what he was meant to do made all the difference.

We are that eagle in the story, but with a twist. Every human being is an eagle, but we've all been conditioned to waddle and peck rather than soar. Every human is made in God's image—that's our identity. We possess kinship with God, which entails a capacity to relate with him. But rather than leaning into our identity, we are "corrupted by . . . deceitful desires" (Ephesians 4:22). We haven't lost our identity, but we aren't living it out the way God intended.

The author of Hebrews tells us that "the Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being" (Hebrews 1:3). Many have concluded from this that because of Jesus' divinity, only Jesus is the image of God, while the rest of us are made *according to* or *in* the image of God. After all, doesn't Colossians 1:15 also say that "the Son is the image of the invisible God"?

I see things a bit differently, as I explained in the introduction. When the New Testament tells us that Jesus is the image of God, it does not say that we are not God's image. Jesus' status as God's image is not connected to his divinity. Rather, it points to his incarnation.⁷ By virtue of being human, Jesus is also the image of God, as we are. The difference is that Jesus did not surrender to sinful desires. In Christ, God's glory is on full display (2 Corinthians 4:4-6). Scripture invites us to gaze at Christ to learn how to be ourselves. As we "contemplate the Lord's glory," we are "transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory" (2 Corinthians 3:18). We must undergo transformation so we can reflect who we truly are.

Christ not only shows us what it looks like to be human, but he invites us into that fullness (Colossians 2:9-10). We can never be ourselves outside of Christ. The current quest

Scripture invites us to gaze at Christ to learn how to be ourselves.

for personal identity can never satisfy us if we define ourselves apart from our kinship with God and our destiny to display the glory of God to creation.

Theologian Ryan Peterson explains that God is the frame of reference for human identity.⁸ Each of us constructs our own identity to some extent, and our unique characteristics are among the most beautiful things about being human. However, Peterson challenges us that to become more like Christ, “we are called to nurture those aspects of our constructed identities which are in harmony with the gospel and to abandon those aspects which are in conflict—no matter how hard and painful such abandonment might be.”⁹ This painful work of dying to self results in greater glory as we become more and more like Jesus.¹⁰

What does this mean for those who experience memory loss or who are otherwise unable to cultivate Christlikeness? Here’s where the payoff to this concept of personhood comes. If our identity is rooted in God, rather than in self-definition, then loss of memory has no effect on our personhood, just as estrangement from God does not erase our status as God’s image. Human dignity does not depend on one’s own ability or self-awareness. When family members lose touch with reality, we carry their personhood in our hearts on their behalf, knowing who they really are, remembering the contours of their lives that they have forgotten.¹¹

Kyle Strobel and John Coe insist that “the only identity that can truly bear the weight of our souls is who we are in Christ. In him, we are fully accepted and fully forgiven.”¹² I spoke earlier about how human identity as God’s image is unchanged. Broken and fallen people retain their status as God’s image, even if their personal capacity for the associated vocation is diminished. We are to treat them accordingly, knowing they have been created as God’s image.

As theologian Suzanne McDonald explains,

None of us will know ourselves or others as we and they truly are until we know each other in the fullness of God’s relationship to us in Christ and ours to God in Christ. Our lives and our true personhood are hid with Christ in God. We will know who we really are only [at the return of Christ], when we will know ourselves as we are known by God, and when in beholding face to face we will also be fully transformed into who we were created to be.¹³

In light of that, we turn to the end. Where is all this headed? Who are we becoming?

EAGER EXPECTATION

We've already noted that to be the image of God implies kinship with God—we're part of God's family. How, then, can we explain the New Testament language about "adoption to sonship" (Romans 9:4)? If we're already sons, how can we still be adopted?

One clue is the designation of Jesus as the "firstborn" (Romans 8:29). In [chapter eight](#) I spoke about how we must be "born again." Jesus' firstborn status is part of this reality. The New Testament presents Jesus as the "new Adam" who represents a new humanity for the new creation.¹⁴ God's family will include those who have participated in Christ's death and resurrection and are raised imperishable. As the firstborn, Christ is the heir of the eschatological (end-times) family of God. Through participation in Christ, we are included in Jesus' status as heir.

Romans 8 paints a glorious picture of our future. Life may seem difficult now, but we are in line to receive great honor. All of creation holds its breath for that moment. Humans may be the crown of creation, but the restoration of our glory ripples through the cosmos.¹⁵ As Paul writes, "Creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God" (Romans 8:21). Meanwhile, "we wait eagerly for our adoption to sonship," a reality that is still future. That adoption includes "the redemption of our bodies" (Romans 8:23). Our bodies themselves will be redeemed. Creation clearly still matters.

The most famous words of Romans 8 appear in verse 28 as translated in the NIV: "And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose." New Testament scholar Haley Goranson Jacob argues for an alternate translation: "God works all things for good *with those* who love God, who are called according to his purpose."¹⁶ If she's right, then Paul's point here is that we don't passively await future redemption. Instead, we actively partner with God in his work of transformation. As Jacob explains, we "represent God within creation and . . . cooperate with God to bring redemption to that creation."¹⁷ This fits with the picture of humanity as God's image in Genesis 1–2 and the portrait of humanity's exalted rule in Psalm 8. As Jacob explains, that portrait is finally realized "through both the Firstborn Son of God and those who participate in his exalted status, that is, his glory."¹⁸

According to Romans 8:29, God saw this coming and destined us “to be conformed to the image (that is) [God’s] Son.”¹⁹ Jacob describes this conformity as “participating in his role as the reigning representative of God within the cosmos.”²⁰

Welcome to the royal family!

KEY IDEAS

- The gospel makes possible a human community undivided by race or by physical or cognitive ability.
- True community is made possible by physical presence and shared participation in communion.
- Our future includes the redemption and glorification of our bodies as we experience full adoption into God’s royal family.

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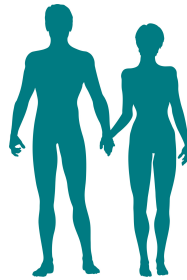
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FROM CREATION TO NEW CREATION



ON EARTH AS IT IS IN HEAVEN

I'll never forget the time in junior high when I thought Jesus had returned. I was in my living room reading when suddenly and unmistakably I heard the trumpet sound. I jumped up and ran to the front porch, fully expecting to see Jesus coming on the clouds. Was this the moment we'd all been waiting for?

It wasn't. To my disappointment, our eccentric neighbor had installed a new horn on his car. He had already souped up the stereo system so that we could feel him coming from more than a block away; the boom of his bass pulsed through our home, making the china rattle. He had swapped out the wheels for bigger ones and installed bright green hubcaps. Our neighbor was impossible to ignore. Washing and waxing this car was already a part-time job. Now he had taken things to a new level: instead of a regular honk, his horn sounded like a trumpet announcing the arrival of royalty. I felt a little silly standing on the porch, thinking it was Jesus.

So what will happen when Jesus *does* return? Most Christians are united in their expectation of Jesus' future, bodily, visible return. But what happens next is a matter of debate. Some suppose that our final destination is heaven while others insist that Jesus' return will signal the restoration of creation and usher in God's rule on earth.

The difference matters a great deal for how we see ourselves in relation to this world now. If we're heading to heaven, does it matter so much how we treat the planet? During my college years, many evangelicals I knew were asking, Why polish the brass on a sinking ship? Or why rearrange deck chairs on the *Titanic*? We were awaiting the rapture, and we would spend eternity in heaven, so why get bent out of shape worrying about taking care of this planet?

WHAT ABOUT THE RAPTURE?

The rapture is a given in many American evangelical churches today, but you might be surprised to learn that it is a rather recent idea. Before the 1800s, Christians did not expect Jesus to secretly snatch them away to heaven before the great tribulation. During my young adulthood, the wild popularity of the Left Behind series of books by Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins ensured that a whole generation was caught up in this idea (see what I did there?).^a LaHaye and Jenkins did not invent the rapture. It arose from the teachings of John Nelson Darby and was popularized by the Scofield Reference Bible, published in 1909.^b

The idea of a rapture is popularly based on two main New Testament texts.^c Both deserve a closer look. As always, it will be important to consider their literary and historical context before we draw firm theological conclusions.

The first text is Matthew 24:36-41. The purpose of this section of Jesus' teaching is summarized in Matthew 24:42: "Therefore keep watch, because you do not know on what day your Lord will come." The exact time of Jesus' return is a mystery. We must be ready at all times. The preceding verses are those most often thought to describe a rapture: "That is how it will be at the coming of the Son of Man. Two men will be in the field; one will be taken and the other left. Two women will be grinding with a hand mill; one will be taken and the other left" (Matthew 24:39-40). It's on this basis that Jenkins and LaHaye imagined the awful fate of those who are "left behind." In their minds, those who miss the rapture will face unimaginable suffering. If their eternal destiny had been secured in time, they would have avoided these trials.

However, what does it mean to be "taken"? If we back up a few verses, the whole framework turns upside down.

"As it was in the days of Noah, so it will be at the coming of the Son of Man. For in the days before the flood, people were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, up to the day Noah entered the ark; and they knew nothing about what would happen until the flood came and took them all away" (Matthew 24:37-39). Who is taken away in the Noah story? It was those swept away by the waters of God's judgment. In other words, if we're Noah, we want to be left behind. Jesus directly connects Noah to the men in the field and the women grinding grain. Those who are left behind are those who are not condemned by God's judgment. They are ready for his return. I see no rapture here. God's faithful followers are not leaving to go somewhere else. They stay.

The second key text people use to support the idea of a rapture is 1 Thessalonians 4:17. Again, this passage is specifically about Jesus' return:

The Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. After that,

we who are still alive and are left [literally those who are left behind!] will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever. (1 Thessalonians 4:16-17)

Here it seems obvious that believers will ascend into the air to meet Jesus, and we will! But notice that this is no secret. Jesus' return will be announced loudly with trumpets.

If Jesus' return is not a secret rapture, what is it? The cultural context helps us understand what is happening here. In the New Testament era, if a king went out to fight battles and came home victorious, the people would rush out to meet him and usher him into the city with rejoicing. The Greek word *Apantēsis* regularly referred to this "meeting." Hoekema explains,

Apantēsis is a technical term used in New Testament times to describe a public welcome given by a city to a visiting dignitary. People would ordinarily leave the city to meet the distinguished visitor and then go back with him into the city. On the basis of the analogy conveyed by this word, all Paul is saying here is that raised and transformed believers are caught up in the clouds to meet the Lord as he descends from heaven, implying that after this joyful meeting they will go back with him to the earth.^d

The scene described in 1 Thessalonians 4 is similar to Christ's triumphal entry into Jerusalem in John 12:

The next day the great crowd that had come for the festival heard that Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem. They took palm branches and *went out to meet him* [*hypantēsis*], shouting,

"Hosanna!"

"Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!"

"Blessed is the king of Israel!" (John 12:12-13, emphasis added)

Without the support of these two passages, frankly, we have no rapture. Yes, Jesus will return visibly, and we will be caught up to meet him so we can accompany him into our world as victorious king. Our "rapture" is not an escape from this world's troubles but rather the moment in which we see Jesus face to face, *enraptured*, and join him in his transforming work to restore all things.

As a teenager, I went on a mission trip to Venezuela for a month with Teen Mania Ministries. We traveled around the capital city of Caracas, presenting a drama in the streets, in schools, and in prisons, introducing people to Jesus. It was an extraordinary experience that shaped me profoundly. As with every teen event in the 1990s, we marked our mountaintop experience by buying and wearing Christian t-shirts. One of these shirts had it all wrong. On the front was a drawing of the globe, surrounded by the words, “This World Is Not My Home” (or “Este Mundo No Es Mi Hogar” on the Spanish version). On the back, the t-shirt read:

This world is not my home
Although it seems to be,
My home is with my God
In the place he’s made for me.
He’s coming back real soon
The signs are very clear
So when the trumpet sounds
I’ll be outta here.

I didn’t buy the shirt. I believed that God had given me work to do, spreading the gospel to all nations. “I’ll be outta here” exemplifies the escapist mentality of many Christians during my childhood years. However, it’s at odds with the Bible’s teaching about the human vocation and about God’s intentions to renew all things.

Not only is this perspective unbiblical, but it has potentially disastrous consequences for life today. If I believe my destiny is elsewhere, why invest in this planet’s long-term health? If I belong elsewhere, why spend time building businesses and schools and societies here? Why create anything at all? Why not just wait things out?

This is why it’s so important for us to rethink our destiny in light of the Bible’s teaching. Jesus urged his disciples to pray, “Your kingdom come, your will be done, *on earth* as it is in heaven” (Matthew 6:10). Creation still matters.

In fact, Christianity was seen as a threat to the Roman Empire precisely because of its expectation of bodily resurrection and the physical reign of Christ on earth. Emperors felt no threat from those who held that this world mattered little and that

God's claims on humanity were spiritual and private, mostly having to do with another world. Christians were considered traitors because of their belief that the risen Jesus claims this present world as his own. His followers expected the kingdom of God to be physical and therefore to rival Rome's claim to the throne.¹

Two books I read many years later dramatically reshaped my thinking on human destiny. They helped me make sense of the unease I felt about that 1990s t-shirt. The first was Anthony Hoekema's *The Bible and the Future*, which I encountered during seminary. The second was J. Richard Middleton's *A New Heaven and a New Earth: Reclaiming Biblical Eschatology*, which addressed all the questions I still had about our future. N. T. Wright's *Surprised by Hope* takes a similar approach. All three books insist that heaven is not a distant place where we'll escape for eternity and that this earth is not destined to be burned to a crisp.² That's what we'll talk about next.

DEFEATING THE POWERS

Back in [chapter three](#), we talked about the unseen world that runs parallel to our own—spirits in rebellion against God's rule who are failing to fulfill their creation mandate. Now that we're nearing the end of our journey through Scripture, we must again consider these rebellious powers. What happens to them in the new creation? And what happens to this present creation?

To find our answer, we return to the book of Colossians. According to Paul, God created all things through Christ's agency, including "things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things have been created through him and for him" (Colossians 1:16). If Paul is right, and I believe he is, then any spiritual being that does not actively carry out God's will—demon or otherwise—is in active rebellion against its created purpose. Christ's purpose was "to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross" (Colossians 1:20).

As a child, I was distraught over Satan's rebellion. I earnestly prayed that Satan would repent and be reconciled to God. The cross is the answer to rebellion in the spirit realm. Paul goes on to explain: "Having disarmed the powers and authorities,

he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross” (Colossians 2:15; see also 1 Peter 3:22). Jesus’ death not only brought about our forgiveness, reconciling us to our Creator, but it signaled the end to all rebellion—both seen and unseen.

Paul is not the only one who sees things this way. Isaiah saw this coming well in advance. In Isaiah 24, the prophet speaks of a future day when Yahweh will bring judgment on the entire earth because of all humanity’s persistent violation of the covenant. Most prophetic texts only condemn the Israelites for covenant unfaithfulness, but here the extent of God’s judgment is cosmic in scope. The prophet announces, “In that day the LORD will punish / the powers in the heavens above / and the kings on the earth below” (Isaiah 24:21). The “powers in the heavens above” are the rulers of the unseen realm that correspond to the earthly rulers whose days are numbered. These powers, both angelic and human, are to be imprisoned and punished (Isaiah 24:22). The prophet uses vivid cosmic imagery to describe that day:

The moon will be dismayed,
the sun ashamed;
for the LORD Almighty will reign
on Mount Zion and in Jerusalem,
and before its elders—with great glory. (Isaiah 24:23)

At this point you might feel a bit confused. What does this have to do with the sun and moon?

A connection between celestial bodies and kingship was established as far back as Genesis 1. The sun, moon, and stars are explicitly created on day four for the purposes of governing the heavens, just as humans are created on day six to rule the earth: “God made two great lights—the greater light to *govern* the day and the lesser light to *govern* the night” (Genesis 1:16, emphasis added). According to the biblical text, the sun, moon, and stars are not mere decoration, and they do not simply provide light so that we can do our work. Their principal task is to regulate days, years, and sacred festivals, just as our principal task is to maintain order on earth.

Why would the sun and moon be ashamed? The regulatory nature of the sun, moon, and stars makes them a fitting analogy for both unseen powers and human rulers, all of whom are appointed to exercise God's rule in life-giving ways. As a result, it's quite common for the Old Testament prophets to describe the rise and fall of kingdoms using cosmic imagery. When he mentions the sun and moon, Isaiah is speaking of rulers who have usurped God's glory through their own rule. The reinstatement of God's glorious rule will put these impostors to shame. They will be shown for the fakes they are.

Richard Middleton shows how the idea of stars falling from heaven in Matthew 24 and Revelation 6 comes from the Greek translation of Isaiah 34:4, which draws on the concept of "stars as corrupt heavenly beings, which are being judged at God's coming."³ (Since our English Old Testaments are usually based on the Hebrew text, we easily miss this connection.) Middleton points to another passage where this connection between stars and rulers is evident: in Isaiah 14, the king of Babylon is depicted as a fallen star.⁴ Middleton concludes, "It is thus likely that the image of stars falling from heaven in the New Testament refers to the eschatological [that is, the end-times] judgment of corrupt heavenly powers, associated with the coming of God's kingdom, rather than to the literal annihilation of part of the cosmos."⁵ To read these passages as the destruction of the created world fails to reckon with their Old Testament background.

Second Peter 3:10 also seems to paint a picture of extensive cosmic destruction: "The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything done in it will be laid bare." However, notice that the earth is not destroyed but "laid bare." What exactly are the "elements" that will be destroyed? While some have argued that this word refers to the basic building blocks of the physical universe, the "elements" could instead refer to the sun, moon, and stars or to corrupt angelic powers. Since these two are often connected in Scripture, Middleton suggests that here the picture is of "God destroying the demonic forces in the heavens and stripping away the upper layer of the cosmos in order to expose the earth to divine judgment."⁶

The fire referenced in passages like 2 Peter 3 is the purifying fire of God, not a destructive force. Much of the cosmic language in passages like Matthew 24 and Revelation 6 draws on imagery from Old Testament prophetic books and is better

understood as massive societal upheaval and the removal of rebel rulers from their thrones.⁷

If you're troubled by corrupt governments and hostile spiritual powers, the good news is that God will unseat and destroy every rebellious entity. The fallout of their reigns will be obliterated, and creation restored to the state God intended. Those of us who are not swept away by God's judgment will be ushered with joy into this (re)new(ed) creation!

ARE YOU THE GARDENER?

As we think about the new creation, I want to return to Jesus' resurrection story, to the moment when Mary Magdalene is crying at the tomb and Jesus comes to her. Here is a woman who has devoted her life to Jesus because he defeated the evil powers that possessed her, setting her free to be the person she was created to be. She is grieving his loss but also grieving what appears to be the abuse of the dead body of the man who rescued her. It is more than she can bear.

What disturbs Mary—the empty tomb—is the best news in human history, but she doesn't realize this yet. Jesus rightly asks, “Why are you crying?” Is her vision blurred by her tears? Is she blinded by her grief? Does Jesus come up behind her? For whatever reason, Mary doesn't recognize him right away. She asks, “Sir, are you the gardener?” (see John 20:15).

Is he? While he is not who she thinks, he is indeed the gardener, the one who planted a garden in the East, in Eden, so that he could fellowship with the humans he created. This is the One who has never ceased to till the soil and prune the trees and celebrate each ripened fruit. This gardener has never given up on this weed-infested plot of hardened ground. He has gone to great lengths—in C. S. Lewis's words, to “hell” and back—to reclaim it.

I'll never forget when I discovered this theme in college. For a class on Old Testament biblical theology, we were supposed to choose one theme or image to trace through the entire Bible. I knew there was a garden in the beginning and a garden in the end, so I decided to see whether there were any gardens in the middle. What a fun exploration! I discovered garden imagery in the temple, that the Promised Land was described like a garden, that rebellion resulted in the loss of

fruitfulness, and that Jesus' moments of greatest temptation were in a garden too. I became more convinced than ever that the Bible was telling a single, epic story, and that the end of the story brought resolution to the problems introduced in the beginning. If creation still matters in Revelation, then our vocation as God's image is still in effect.

The final chapters of John's vision in Revelation unveil our glorious future. Rather than humans going up to heaven, heaven comes down to us, in the form of a cubic garden city, the new Jerusalem. Heaven and earth intersect again at last. Human civilization will finally be good rather than characterized by exploitative power and greed. John's vision weaves so many threads from earlier prophetic texts—the Garden of Eden with perpetual access to the tree of life, fruits of all kinds, gemstone foundations for each of twelve gates representing each of the twelve tribes, the life-giving river of Ezekiel's temple vision, and the participation of people from all nations. It is here that we will be our truest human selves, exercising our role as God's image, stewarding creation by ruling it well and serving our Maker. The cubic shape of the city mimics the dimensions of the Most Holy Place of Israel's tabernacle, with one key difference: it encompasses all of creation.⁸ No part of the new creation is hidden from the presence of God. The absence of the sun means there will be no more need for festivals to mark time (see Genesis 1:14). Every day will be spent in the glorious presence of God.

Watch how the two primary dimensions of our identity are joined in the climax of the vision:

No longer will there be any curse. The throne of God and of the Lamb will be in the city, and his servants will serve him. They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. There will be no more night. They will not need the light of a lamp or the light of the sun, for the Lord God will give them light. And they will reign for ever and ever. (Revelation 22:3-5)

The curse of Eden is ended. The presence of God is restored in the midst of human society. Those basking in his presence will be those who bear his name. Redeemed humanity will do what it has been designed to do from the beginning: serve him by reigning as his ambassador.

The new Jerusalem is a safe place for every member of the community. We need not fear being victims of attack, sorcery, rape, murder, heretical practices, or false accusation (Revelation 22:15). All rebellious powers have been defeated and barred from entrance. Everyone in the city will have been washed with the blood of Jesus and will eat freely from the tree of life (Revelation 22:14).

Jesus, the gardener,
is inviting us to join him
in cultivating the new
creation.

This hope is not wishful thinking. As Eugene Peterson says, “Hoping is not dreaming. It is not spinning an illusion or fantasy to protect us from our boredom or our pain. It means a confident, alert expectation that God will do what he said he will do. It is imagination put in the harness of faith.”⁹ Jesus, the gardener, is inviting us to join him in cultivating the new creation.

JOIN THE REVOLUTION

People tend to fall into one of two camps when it comes to the book of Revelation. Some are obsessed with it, poring through it for clues about the future and reading it alongside their daily newspaper for signs of the last days. For these people, the book is like an exciting puzzle. Others are repelled by the book of Revelation. It seems scary or odd or terribly confusing, and they’d rather leave it to someone else to figure out.

Ironically, the book is not supposed to have either effect. It is neither a guide to our daily newspaper nor a way of scaring us into submission. It was written as a word of comfort to first-century believers. One reason we fail to see it that way is that we don’t naturally understand apocalyptic literature. *Apocalypse* means “unveiling.”¹⁰ It is meant to reveal reality, not obscure it, but that’s not how most of us experience it. That’s because Western literature has nothing quite like apocalyptic literature. The closest genre we have is political cartoons.¹¹

In a political cartoon, nations or political parties are often represented by conventional animals (Russia is a bear, China is a dragon, the United States is an eagle, Canada is a beaver, the Republican Party is an elephant, the Democratic Party is a donkey, etc.). Other national symbols also appear, such as Lady Liberty or

Uncle Sam. These symbols have a long history. And since having to explain a joke ruins it, political cartoons often don't include obvious labels. Viewers are expected to know what the various symbols represent. These symbols are conventional enough that the meaning is usually obvious.

While reading apocalyptic literature such as the biblical books of Daniel and Revelation, we encounter many symbolic figures—beasts, horns, eyes, bowls, a sealed scroll, and various wild animals. These animals represent kingdoms or rulers, much like modern American political cartoons. If we don't realize that, we're likely to think that the future is terrifying indeed!

The fact that John's visions are full of symbols does not make them fictional. The symbols point to political and theological realities that actually take place on the stage of human history.¹²

One of the most striking things about the book of Revelation is the way it ties together threads from the entire biblical story. Genesis 1–3 is especially prominent. If there was any doubt that creation still matters, Revelation should dispel that notion once and for all.

In the early chapters of Revelation, Christ appears as one “like a son of man,” that is, human (Revelation 1:13). He is called the “Living One” (Revelation 1:18), holds the stars in his right hand (Revelation 1:20), and is “the ruler of God's creation” (Revelation 3:14). As the model human, Jesus rightly and rightfully exercises his human vocation to rule over creation, including the unseen realm.¹³

He tells John to write to the churches, calling them to repent and hold fast to their faith. Jesus urges the churches to remain vigilant in the face of the cosmic struggle against his rule. As Michael Gorman explains, “They will be victorious in this war, not by wielding swords, but by following Jesus in ‘uncivil’ worship and faithful witness.”¹⁴ Those who do will gain “the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God” (Revelation 2:7), “will not be hurt at all by the second death” (Revelation 2:11), and will buy white garments with which to cover their “shameful nakedness” (Revelation 3:18). With sin and death reversed and access to the tree of life restored, it should be no surprise that these faithful followers of Jesus will reign with him. Jesus announces, “To the one who is victorious, I will give the right to sit with me on my throne” (Revelation 3:21) and “to the one who is victorious and does my will to the end, I will give authority over

the nations” (Revelation 2:26). Those allied with the Living One will exercise their human vocation as stewards and rulers of all creation.

In the throne-room scene that follows in Revelation 4, created beings from various classes (wild animal, domesticated animal, human, and bird) surround the throne of God to worship him. The reason for their worship is clearly stated:

You are worthy, our Lord and God,
to receive glory and honor and power,
for you created all things,
and by your will they were created
and have their being. (Revelation 4:11)

If God’s intention had been to destroy this created world and bring believers to heaven, then why worship him as Creator? There on God’s heavenly throne his most glorious attribute is his role as Creator. Creation is an integral part of God’s glorious self-revelation and the essential sphere in which we as humans can live out our vocation.

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The scene continues to develop in Revelation 5 as Jesus the slain lamb is found worthy to open the scroll representing God’s decree. The living creatures and elders sing another song—this one about how Jesus is worthy:

You are worthy to take the scroll
and to open its seals,
because you were slain,
and with your blood you purchased for God
persons from every tribe and language and people and nation.
(Revelation 5:9)

Christ accomplished the redemption of people from every nation, fulfilling the promise to Abraham that all nations would be blessed through his descendants (Genesis 12:1-3). But notice the purpose of this redemption, expressed in the next verse: “You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to serve our God, / and they will reign on the earth” (Revelation 5:10). Their priestly service is reminiscent of Adam and Eve’s priestly service in the Garden of Eden (Genesis 2:15). Now they will fulfill the role they were designed to fill in Genesis 1:28, to rule over all created things on God’s behalf. In other words, eternity is not one long worship service in which we “sing of his love forever” but an active rulership over a restored creation.¹⁵

We are so quick to spiritualize biblical imagery of kingship that perhaps we miss the political dimension of John’s vision. The throne-room vision simultaneously unveils God’s exaltation while boldly denouncing Caesar’s right to rule. By mimicking the Roman imperial court, Jesus exposes Caesar as a usurper. As David Mathewson explains, “God’s throne, not Caesar’s, stands at the center of all reality.”¹⁶ This truth should unsettle any illusion we have about earthly kingdoms as the answer to the world’s problems apart from God.

Being saved is so much more than avoiding an eternity without God. It is a declaration of allegiance to the true king that results in the actualization of human potential. In short, we cannot become all we were meant to be without the victory of Jesus over sin and death and our participation in his reign on earth. The Christian hope is thoroughly practical and political. It’s a revolution resulting in a complete change of governance. We get to participate even now.

KEY IDEAS

- Jesus’ return will not signal the destruction of this planet or the secret rapture of believers but will instead initiate his reign as king on earth.
- The rebellious powers of heaven and earth will be decisively defeated, and this world will be purified and restored.
- Jesus calls us to turn from sin, declare our allegiance to him, and wait expectantly for his return. While waiting, we are to exercise our human vocation as stewards of creation.

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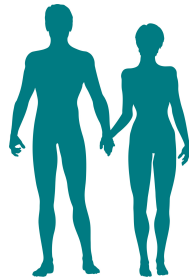
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CONCLUSION



HOW SHOULD WE LIVE?

Sometimes children offer the best window on what it means to be human. Their activities are uninhibited by adult expectations and schedules. When I was in fourth grade, our family moved from one house to another within the same zip code. Although it was only a few miles away, our new house created a sense of connectedness to the various spheres of my life. Our church was only half a block away. I could see it from our front porch. Our elementary school was one block in the other direction (as the crow flies). My younger brother and I walked to school from then on. At first, we walked the long way around the block, but we soon discovered that by cutting through the parking lot of an apartment building, squeezing through a gap in the chain link fence, and crossing an open field, we could be there in half the time.

I remember the first spring in that neighborhood when the snow was beginning to melt. John and I were on our way home from school, trudging through snow and ice, and found a large puddle in the corner of the parking lot. Melting snow had created a small lake in the lowest section of the lot that made it more difficult to get

through. Ice-encrusted leaves had blocked the drain. It was clear to us that the apartment manager was not doing anything about this grave problem. So when we arrived home, we dropped off our backpacks, grabbed some shovels, and headed back to the parking lot. We hacked away at the ice and shoveled leaves until the water started draining away.

This routine went on for days, maybe even weeks. After school we would grab a snack and our shovels and head back to work. We were on a mission. We were doing our part.

And we were being watched. An older lady who lived in the apartments had noticed us. She invited us inside for some hot cocoa. With Mom's permission, we visited her now and then. She gave us cookies and we talked. I don't remember her name, but I do remember the sense of "rightness" in our intergenerational friendship. I imagine she was lonely and somehow found delight in our diligent work in her parking lot. I'd like to think that our visits helped her lean into her own calling to nurture.

John and I were committed to our self-appointed project. Our mission was to save the world. It lasted only as long as the spring thaw, but we had a taste of human vocation. We were making a difference.

Clay Scroggins, in his book *How to Lead When You're Not in Charge*, talks about how lack of control can lead to apathy. You and I don't tackle problems around us because we think it's not our job. We naturally connect leadership with authority. If we don't have the authority, we hang back. But Scroggins argues that "long-term, sustained leadership is not based on authority but on influence."¹ He says we can cultivate influence, in part by rejecting passivity. This is especially crucial when we lack authority. He offers three ways to accomplish this, using the acronym CPR: Choosing, Planning, Responding.² First, we can choose something and do it without being assigned. (This is what John and I did with the parking lot down the street.) Second, we can plan a solution to a problem and pitch it to those who do have authority. Third, we can respond to what our boss cares about most.

Building on Scroggins' helpful paradigm, I'd like to take things a bit further. Our journey through Scripture has shown us that we have been given authority. We are "sons of Adam and daughters of Eve." As humans, our job is to "fill . . . subdue . . . and rule" over the created world. We are participants in the rule of the Second Adam, that is, Christ. We are most alive when we lean into this God-given human

vocation. If you see something that needs doing and you have the skills and energy to do it, go for it! Like our parking lot puddle, perhaps the problem seems insignificant. But every little task adds up. When John and I tackled the puddle, we gained a sense that we were making a difference in the world. And though we hadn't intended to, we experienced a bit of joyful community with a lonely woman in the process.

Throughout this book we've been exploring what the Bible says about what it means to be human. In [part 3](#), we've examined Jesus' birth, miracles, death, resurrection, and ascension as key to understanding human personhood. One of Jesus' parables—the parable of the “ten talents”—will help us to bring this exploration full circle. In this context, “talents” (or “minas” in the NIV) are not life skills, but units of money entrusted to stewards. Apparently, Jesus' contemporaries suffered from the same malady that we often do: “they thought that the kingdom of God was going to appear at once” (Luke 19:11). Theology has consequences, and in this case, their sense of end-times immediacy prevented them from fulfilling their human vocation on earth. Jesus addresses their faulty perspective with a story.

The parable depicts a nobleman set to become king who entrusts each of his servants with a large sum of money and tells them, “Put this money to work” (Luke 19:13). Upon his return, the day of reckoning, he asked “what they had gained with it” (19:15). No matter that some had rejected his rulership while he was away. He was king, like it or not, and they answered to him. I can't help but connect this parable with the creation narratives of Genesis, where humans are appointed as stewards of tangible resources in service to God.

God's purpose for creation was vindicated by Christ's physical, bodily resurrection, which gives us a taste of what's to come.

In the parable, the returning king reserved praise for those who had taken what he entrusted to them and presented him with a huge return on that investment. The king says, “Because you have been trustworthy in a very small matter, take charge of ten cities” (19:17).

Jesus' parable illuminates our human vocation. We will answer to God for our stewardship on the day Jesus returns. The “wicked” are those who begrudge God's plan to maintain the fruitfulness of creation by appointing humans to represent him.

They miss the point entirely, and in this parable, they run the risk of missing eternal life in God's kingdom.

Whether we like it or not, Jesus is king, and he will return someday. We are his sons and daughters. When we remain on mission, we open ourselves to what it truly means to be God's image. If we are captivated by a vision of creational flourishing and participate wholeheartedly, the glories of this world are merely the beginning.

Our journey through Scripture has shown us that our work matters because God is in the process of restoring all things. This world is not a failed experiment or a temporary staging ground for eternity. God called it very good. In the midst of our suffering and disillusionment, God invited us to pray honestly, to let go of our own need to understand everything, to trust him, and to learn to enjoy the journey. One feature of our faith in God is hope for the future. God's purpose for creation was vindicated by Christ's physical, bodily resurrection, which gives us a taste of what's to come. Our bodies, too, will be raised so that we can experience life eternal on this planet, restored to all its intended glory. We can participate with hope in this glorious vision. We can't do everything alone, of course. We need each other—all of us. But as we care for our corners of the world, bringing order and sowing hope, we bring honor to our Creator and fulfill our calling as humans, side by side.

TELLING THE GREATEST STORY

If all this is true, and I believe it is, then we need to reimagine the way we share the gospel, or good news. Yes, Jesus died for our sins, but not so that we can spend eternity in heaven. Getting saved is not about avoiding hell. Our destiny is not disembodied floating on the clouds. The gospel speaks to our bodies and transforms our communities now. The gospel defines our human identity and sets the trajectory for the future of this planet.

The Bible declares to us our intrinsic value. Out of all he created, God selected humans as his special representatives. He endowed us with the glory that befits our status as members of God's royal family. He gave us each other so that we can carry out meaningful work together. His intention was for us to live in intimate fellowship with God and with each other, maintaining order as we steward the resources of creation so that all may flourish.

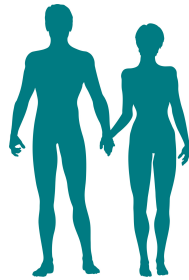
The first humans rejected this status, preferring to rule on their own terms rather than God's. As a result, they experienced alienation from God, from each other, and from the rest of creation. They lost the glory of their exalted status, and they lost meaningful community with God and one another.

In order for God's purposes for creation to be realized, God became human himself in the person of Jesus, born of a woman. Jesus embodied our human vocation in a glorious way by maintaining fellowship with God and by drawing others to himself. He offered his own body in self-giving love for the sake of others.

Jesus' act of selfless love reversed the curse of sin. As Jesus' resurrected body burst from the tomb, the new creation burst into our world and began the process of renewing all things. Jesus' ascension and enthronement are the reality to which we are to orient our lives, pledging our allegiance to Jesus as the true king and following his example of self-giving love. We serve as his ambassadors as we await our resurrection in the renewed earth, after which we will reign forever with him.

The Bible invites us into a dramatically different quality of life, a beloved community in which we can know God and one another as we are truly known. In short, the Bible offers more than fire insurance. As N. T. Wright said so well, "This is the greatest story ever told, and it will draw all our stories up into it."³ It is the doorway to Narnia, where we discover that we are and have always been kings and queens, not only in that world, but also in this one.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS



I'm grateful to so many dear people for their contributions to this project. Anna Moseley Gissing invited me to write this book, and Rachel Hastings saw it to completion. The entire team at InterVarsity Press showed enthusiasm for the project, and their tireless work is why you're holding it in your hands.

Working on this book was a completely different experience from writing *Bearing God's Name*. While the first book flowed out of my own dissertation research, I could not have written this one without the excellent scholarship of Catherine McDowell, John Kilner, Ryan Peterson, Marc Cortez, Haley Goranson Jacob, N. T. Wright, and especially Richard Middleton, who so generously agreed to write the foreword. Each of you taught me so much about the image of God! Even where we disagree, your views have helped me clarify my own.

The L. Russ Bush Center for Faith & Culture at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary invited me to speak at their conference on Exploring Personhood in February 2022, which offered a wonderful venue to test these ideas and get constructive feedback. Their hospitality did not expire, even when I brought hard words about the Southern Baptist Convention's failures to treat all people as the image of God.

I'm thankful for my colleagues at Prairie College, where I began this work, and at Biola University, where I completed it. All of you have been excellent conversation partners and supportive friends. A special shout out to James Enns, Justin Allison, Charlie Trimm, Ken Way, Ron Pierce, Jeannine Hanger, Octavio Esqueda, Leon Harris, and Dominick Hernandez—each of whom has made this journey richer.

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My husband, Daniel, has been the best ally one could hope for. While my voice is the one on these pages, his is in the background holding me steady, helping me process, making us dinner, and being my person. I love doing life together with someone whose strengths are so refreshingly different from mine.

Writing this book has been an exercise in trust. I had only the barest outline of a roadmap when I began this wilderness trek. The insights on these pages came to me as manna day by day—often from random conversations, books that showed up in the mail, podcasts, sermons, student questions, and so much more. God's provision has been such an adventure! I offer it to you knowing that so much more could be said, and must be, about what it means to be human. I pray this book has fanned the flame of your desire to know the One by whom you are fully known.

APPENDIX: RESOURCES FROM THE BIBLEPROJECT

CHAPTER 1

“Heaven and Earth.”

The BibleProject

ivpress.com/imes30



“Sabbath.”

The BibleProject

ivpress.com/imes31



“Genesis 1” (Visual Commentary).

The BibleProject

ivpress.com/imes32



CHAPTER 2

“Genesis 1–11” (Torah Series).

The BibleProject

ivpress.com/imes33



“Image of God.”

The BibleProject

ivpress.com/imes34



“Generosity.”
The BibleProject
ivpress.com/imes35



CHAPTER 3

“The Test.”
The BibleProject
ivpress.com/imes36



“Eternal Life.”
The BibleProject
ivpress.com/imes37



“Tree of Life.”
The BibleProject
ivpress.com/imes38



CHAPTER 4

SPIRITUAL BEINGS SERIES

“Intro to Spiritual Beings.”
The BibleProject
ivpress.com/imes39



“Elohim.”
The BibleProject
ivpress.com/imes40



“The Divine Council.”
The BibleProject
ivpress.com/imes41



“Angels and Cherubim.”

The BibleProject

ivpress.com/imes42



“Angel of the Lord.”

The BibleProject

ivpress.com/imes43



“The Satan and Demons.”

The BibleProject

ivpress.com/imes44



“The New Humanity.”

The BibleProject

ivpress.com/imes45



INTERMISSION

“Blessing and Curse.”

The BibleProject

ivpress.com/imes46



CHAPTER 5

“The Book of Proverbs” (Wisdom Series).

The BibleProject

ivpress.com/imes47



“Proverbs 8” (Visual Commentary).

The BibleProject

ivpress.com/imes48



“Psalm 8” (Visual Commentary).
The BibleProject
ivpress.com/imes49



CHAPTER 6

“The Book of Ecclesiastes” (Wisdom Series).
The BibleProject
ivpress.com/imes50



“Overview: Ecclesiastes” (Read Scripture).
The BibleProject
ivpress.com/imes51



“The Book of Job” (Wisdom Series).
The BibleProject
ivpress.com/imes52



“Overview: Job” (Read Scripture).
The BibleProject
ivpress.com/imes53



CHAPTER 7

“John 1—The Word Becomes Human” (Visual Commentary).
The BibleProject
ivpress.com/imes54



“Messiah.”
The BibleProject
ivpress.com/imes55



“Overview: John 1–12” (Read Scripture).

The BibleProject

ivpress.com/imes56



CHAPTER 8

“Heaven and Earth.”

The BibleProject

ivpress.com/imes57



“Overview: John 13–21” (Read Scripture).

The BibleProject

ivpress.com/imes58



“Son of Man.”

The BibleProject

ivpress.com/imes59



CHAPTER 9

“Overview: Ephesians” (Read Scripture).

The BibleProject

ivpress.com/imes60



“Overview: Philemon” (Read Scripture).

The BibleProject

ivpress.com/imes61



CHAPTER 10

“Apocalyptic Literature” (How to Read the Bible).

The BibleProject

ivpress.com/imes62



“Overview: Revelation 1–11” (Read Scripture).

The BibleProject

ivpress.com/imes63



“Overview: Revelation 12–22” (Read Scripture).

The BibleProject

ivpress.com/imes64



“Temple.”

The BibleProject

ivpress.com/imes65



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

INTRODUCTION

Read Genesis 1–11 to get an idea of what the first four chapters of this book will be about.

1. The author describes the experience of reading the Bible as entering a portal into a magical world like the wardrobe in C. S. Lewis's book *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* (see first paragraphs of introduction). How is reading the Bible similar to being transported to another world?
2. The author deliberately refers to God's image not as something we bear but as something we are. What do you think the differences are between bearing and being God's image?

1 PATTERN OF CREATION

Read Genesis 1:1–2:3.

1. The author states that the creation week is meant to be a template for the human work week. How does this compare to the way you have understood Genesis 1?
2. The author notes that the Bible addresses ancient people in an ancient culture using a language that is not our own. How does this shift the way you read the Bible?

3. The author states that “one way to guard against projecting our own views on the Bible is to read it in community.” What value have you gained from reading with others?
4. What changes do you need to make in your life to experience the gift of Sabbath rest?

2 CROWN OF CREATION

Read Genesis 2.

1. The author quotes theologian Marc Cortez: “We need to view the *imago Dei* as a declaration that God intended to create human persons to be the physical means through which he would manifest his own divine presence in the world.” How have you experienced the presence of God through the presence of others?
2. There are at least three different ways to understand the plural pronouns in the phrases “let us,” “our image,” and “our likeness” in the creation account. Which view of their meaning do you find most persuasive?
3. What is an active step you could take to better steward creation in your role as God’s image?
4. In what ways did this chapter challenge your vision of gender roles?

3 GETTING TO WORK

Read Genesis 3:1–4:16.

1. According to the author, “God wired us to actively participate in his work in the world. When we are prevented from doing so, it’s demoralizing.” In what ways have you seen this to be true?
2. Has the book shifted your understanding of your own vocation? If so, describe how.
3. The author says, “We cannot accurately define ourselves without reference to God.” What happens when we try to define ourselves apart from God?

4. Give examples of what might need to change in your church or school community if you took seriously the idea that every person is God's image, regardless of abilities, marital status, or gender.

4 THE HUMAN PROJECT

Read Genesis 4:17-26, Genesis 9, and Genesis 11:1-9.

1. The genealogy in Genesis 5 breaks its own pattern by telling us that Enoch "walked faithfully with God" (Genesis 5:22). How does this offer hope?
2. Why is it important to affirm that the image of God includes all people, regardless of mental or physical capacity?
3. In Genesis 6:1-4, the sons of God repeated the sin of the first humans when they "saw" and "took" (NIV "married") those who were off limits to them. How do you see this sin being repeated today?
4. God's intention is for humans to "fill the earth" (Genesis 1:28), and to "work . . . and take care of" creation (Genesis 2:15), but not to dominate others. By what criteria could we measure our institutions to assess whether they are fulfilling this mandate?

INTERMISSION

Read Genesis 12:1-9.

1. How would you explain the difference between being God's image and bearing God's name?
2. Have you already read *Bearing God's Name*? If so, what are some of your key takeaways?

5 THE HUMAN QUEST

Read Proverbs 8, Psalm 8, and Psalm 89.

1. According to the author, “wisdom always involves a choice.” In what areas of life do you find it hardest to choose to trust God rather than chart your own path?
2. Why is it problematic to think of sexual intercourse as a need or a right?
3. In what ways does pornography disrupt God’s design for human relationships?
4. Although God appointed humans to rule creation, we are not expected to do this in our own strength. How do the Psalms encourage dependence on God?

6 HUMAN SUFFERING

Read Ecclesiastes 1–2 and Job 1–3.

1. The author insists that Ecclesiastes does not say that life is meaningless but rather that its meaning can be hard to grasp. How does this approach compare with ways that you have heard the book taught?
2. Have you or someone close to you had a life-threatening illness or injury that gave you perspective? If so, share what you learned through that experience.
3. Job’s friends seemed to make his suffering worse. Can you give an example of a helpful response to your own suffering?
4. The author states, “In reality, it’s good news that we can’t do it all and that we don’t last forever.” How does the idea of living within limits encourage you?

7 JESUS, THE HUMAN

Read John 1–2, 9, 18–19, and Mark 5.

1. What are some ways that women participate alongside men in Jesus’ life and ministry?
2. The way Jesus handles anger is a model for us. In what ways could you grow into healthier ways of handling your anger?

3. Sometimes, instead of healing someone, God empowers that person. Share about a time when God empowered you instead of fixing something miraculously in your life.
4. In what ways does Jesus' death show us what it is to be truly human?

8 A NEW HUMANITY

Read John 20 and 1 Corinthians 15.

1. How does Jesus' resurrection change the way we think about our own futures?
2. How can the resurrection and ascension of Jesus serve as a model for how we are to think about our own bodies?
3. What are some specific ways you can kill your selfish desires in order to participate in the death of Christ?
4. What aspects of the historic church calendar would you like to learn more about or start practicing with more intent?

9 THE BELOVED COMMUNITY

Read Ephesians and Romans 8.

1. What impact did Christ's work on the cross have for the relationship between Jews and Gentiles in Paul's day?
2. What might it look like for believers today to fulfill our new creation ministry of reconciliation? In what areas is reconciliation needed?
3. The author says, "Scripture invites us to gaze at Christ to learn how to be ourselves." Give examples of how we can better understand who we are by observing Jesus.
4. What practical steps could your church or school community take to prioritize care and inclusion of those with disabilities? What barriers prevent full participation?

10 FROM CREATION TO NEW CREATION

Read Colossians 1 and Revelation 21–22.

1. The author insists that creation still matters, even after Jesus returns. How would your thinking about eternity need to change to include humans' active rulership over a restored creation?
2. The idea of the rapture is popularly based on two New Testament texts. Explain why the author does not think these texts teach that believers will secretly ascend to heaven before the tribulation.
3. The author points out that "God will unseat and destroy every rebellious entity," and creation will be restored to the state God intended. How does this offer perspective on problems in the world today?
4. Did this chapter shift your view of the book of Revelation? If so, how?

CONCLUSION

1. How does a lack of perceived authority lead to apathy? See under subhead How Should We Live?
2. How can you make better use of your God-given authority on this earth?
3. Since the gospel speaks to our embodied selves and transforms our communities now, what needs to change about the way we share the gospel?

NOTES

FOREWORD

1. This model of the image is similar to Augustine's notion that the image consisted of three aspects of the human soul, which he thought corresponded to the triune nature of God. He proposed different sets of threes in his treatise *On the Trinity* (especially Books 7–15) and ended up with the triad of memory, intellect, and will. See “The Trinity,” in *Augustine: Later Works*, ed. and trans. by John Burnaby, Library of Christian Classics 8 (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1955). The view of the image that I learned wasn't explicitly linked to God as Trinity.
2. Francis Schaeffer, *The God Who Is There* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1968); *Escape from Reason* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1968); *He Is There and He Is Not Silent* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 1972).
3. The importance for context (both the biblical context and the context of the ancient world) shows up in the subtitle of the first essay I wrote on the topic. J. Richard Middleton, “The Liberating Image? Interpreting the *Imago Dei* in Context,” *Christian Scholar's Review* 24 (1994): 8-25.
4. My fuller development of the image of God theme is found in J. Richard Middleton, *The Liberating Image: The Imago Dei in Genesis 1* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2005).
5. I linked the *imago Dei* with the broader biblical vision of creation and redemption in J. Richard Middleton, *A New Heaven and a New Earth: Reclaiming Biblical Eschatology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2014).
6. Carmen Joy Imes, *Bearing God's Name: Why Sinai Still Matters* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2019); *Bearing YHWH's Name at Sinai: A Reexamination of the Name Command in the Decalogue*, Bulletin for Biblical Research Supplement 19 (University Park, PA: Eisenbrauns, 2018). The first (more popular) book is based on the second (more academic) book, which won the R. B. Y. Scott Award from the Canadian Society of Biblical Studies (CSBS) for an outstanding book in Hebrew Bible and/or the ancient Near East. As vice-president of CSBS that year, I had the privilege of presenting Carmen with the award.

1 PATTERN OF CREATION

1. I am indebted to John Walton for some of these ideas.
2. Some have suggested that this refers to a vapor barrier or canopy that collapsed, causing the flood. The change in climate resulted in decreased human lifespans and was responsible for the loss of certain species of animals. That approach is driven by an attempt to harmonize the biblical text with science. Such a theory is possible but would not have been observable by the author of Genesis 1.
3. Henri Blocher, *In the Beginning: The Opening Chapters of Genesis* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1984), 33.
4. Blocher, *In the Beginning*, 33.
5. Blocher, *In the Beginning*, 57.
6. John H. Walton, *Ancient Near Eastern Thought and the Old Testament: Introducing the Conceptual World of the Hebrew Bible*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2018), chap. 7.
7. Translations of these words are my own. NIV has “vault,” but vaults are usually enclosed and locked spaces.
8. For a scholarly defense of kinship as a key aspect of the image of God, see Catherine L. McDowell, *The Image of God in the Garden of Eden: The Creation of Humankind in Genesis 2:5–3:24 in Light of mīs pī pīt pī and wpt-r Rituals of Mesopotamia and Ancient Egypt*, Siphut 15 (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2015).
9. Michael LeFebvre, *The Liturgy of Creation: Understanding Calendars in Old Testament Context* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2019).
10. Thanks to my anonymous peer reviewer for pointing this out.
11. See P. P. Jenson, “sheva’,” in *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis*, ed. Willem VanGemeren (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1997), 4:34.
12. Cf. 1 Chronicles 22:9.
13. These passages are noted by John H. Walton, *Genesis 1 as Ancient Cosmology* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2011), 179. Walton argues that the creation week is the inauguration of a cosmic temple. For more on divine rest, see Walton, *Genesis 1*, 110-19.
14. For example, the building of a temple is the climax of the *Enuma Elish*. William W. Hallo and K. Lawson Younger, eds., *The Context of Scripture* (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 1:111, tablet IV, lines 142-46.
15. Walton, *Genesis 1*, 190. For an alternative view, see Daniel I. Block, “Eden: A Temple? A Reassessment of the Biblical Evidence,” in *From Creation to New Creation: Biblical Theology and Exegesis*, ed. Daniel M. Gurtner and Benjamin L. Gladd (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2013), 3-29.
16. If you’re confused because you thought that the Old Testament laws were only for the Jews, then you might want to pause here and read Carmen Joy Imes, *Bearing God’s Name*:

Why Sinai Still Matters (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2019). I make the case there that the law still applies to Christians, though not precisely in the same ways that it did for Israel, given the change in cultural context.

2 CROWN OF CREATION

1. Among those who rightly critique these views are John Kilner, Richard Middleton, Catherine McDowell, and Ryan Peterson.
2. Other Bible passages where *tselem* refers to an idol statue: Numbers 33:52, 2 Kings 11:18, and Amos 5:26. For other ancient languages with a related concept, such as Egyptian and Akkadian, see J. Richard Middleton, *The Liberating Image: The Imago Dei in Genesis 1* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2005), chap. 3.
3. Marc Cortez, *ReSourcing Theological Anthropology: A Constructive Account of Humanity in the Light of Christ* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2017), 110-11.
4. Cortez, *ReSourcing Theological Anthropology*, 109.
5. N. T. Wright, “Excursus on Paul’s Use of Adam,” in *The Lost World of Adam and Eve: Genesis 2–3 and the Human Origins Debate*, by John H. Walton (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2015), 175.
6. Middleton explains that “to ‘rule’ is the purpose, not simply the consequence or result, of the *imago Dei*” (*Liberating Image*, 53), but we cannot define the image by its purpose. It is a “permanent implication” (*Liberating Image*, 54); it is “virtually constitutive of the image” (*Liberating Image*, 55).
7. Richard Bauckham, *The Bible and Ecology: Rediscovering the Community of Creation* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2010), 16-19.
8. “Image” and “likeness” appear to be synonyms here and in Genesis 1:26.
9. The genealogy focuses on Seth here rather than Cain and Abel, not because they were not images of Adam but because this genealogy traces a single chain of descendants leading from Adam to Noah, who experiences deliverance from the consequences of systemic sin.
10. See Catherine L. McDowell, *The Image of God in the Garden of Eden: The Creation of Humankind in Genesis 2:5–3:24 in Light of mīs pī pīt pī and wpt-r Rituals of Mesopotamia and Ancient Egypt*, Siphut 15 (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2015), 125-26.
11. Bauckham, *Bible and Ecology*, 16-17. See also Exodus 23:10-12, where humans are told to leave some of their harvest for wild animals.
12. *The Lion King*, directed by Roger Allers and Rob Minkoff (Burbank, CA: Walt Disney Pictures, 1994).
13. Middleton, *Liberating Image*, 89.
14. For a robust defense of the deity of Jesus, see Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the God of Israel: God Crucified and Other Studies on the New Testament’s Christology of Divine*

Identity (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008). Other interpreters suggest that God is using the “royal ‘we’” in Genesis 1:26, but this is also unlikely.

15. As Chisholm notes, all the commands in Genesis 1:28 are plural, addressed to the man and the woman. Robert B. Chisholm, “Male and Female in the Genesis Creation Accounts,” in *Sanctified Sexuality: Valuing Sex in an Oversexed World*, ed. Sandra L. Glahn and C. Gary Barnes (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 2020), 66.

16. Lucy Peppiatt, *The Imago Dei: Humanity Made in the Image of God*, Cascade Companions (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2022), 65. Similarly, Kilner argues on this basis that the *imago Dei* is corporate, with implications for individuals. John F. Kilner, *Dignity and Destiny: Humanity in the Image of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2015), 318.

17. Dorothy L. Sayers poses this question in “The Human—Not-Quite Human,” in *Are Women Human?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1971), 37.

18. McKirland notes, “While maleness and femaleness do feature in these creation accounts, masculinity and femininity do not. Instead, when male and female are discussed in detail, the point is to show the similarity of the man and the woman.” Christa McKirland, “Image of God and Divine Presence: A Critique of Gender Essentialism,” in *Discovering Biblical Equality*, ed. Ronald W. Pierce and Cynthia Long Westfall, 3rd ed. (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2021), 296.

19. Peppiatt, *Imago Dei*, 19, from Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Making of Man*, 16.8-9.

20. Genesis 2:15 isn’t clear about what the threat is to the garden. The Hebrew word *shamar* could simply mean “tend,” but the same word is used in Genesis 3:24 for the cherubim’s swords that “guard” the way to the tree of life.

21. Middleton, *Liberating Image*, 294.

22. This phrase is a reference to “Adam and Eve’s biologically based kinship bond.” McDowell, *Image of God in the Garden of Eden*, 138-39. See also Genesis 29:14; 37:27; Leviticus 18:6; 25:49; Judges 9:2-3; 2 Samuel 5:1; Nehemiah 5:5.

23. For those who argue that since Adam came first, he is superior, I would simply point out that God made animals before humans in Genesis 1, but humans are clearly the climax of God’s creative work. For a variety of interpretations of this, see Amanda W. Benckhuysen, *The Gospel According to Eve: A History of Women’s Interpretation* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2019); and Katherine C. Bushnell, *God’s Word to Women: One Hundred Bible Studies on Woman’s Place in the Divine Economy* (North Collins, NY: Ray B. Munson, 1923).

24. Ultimately, the “seed of the woman” would crush the serpent, so salvation from bondage to sin also comes through the woman.

25. Peter J. Gentry and Stephen J. Wellum, *Kingdom Through Covenant: A Biblical-Theological Understanding of the Covenants* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 189. Quoted in McKirland, “Image of God and Divine Presence,” 291.

26. McKirland, “Image of God and Divine Presence,” 291. See also Mary Conway, “Gender in Creation and Fall: Genesis 1–3,” in *Discovering Biblical Equality: Biblical, Theological,*

Cultural, and Practical Perspectives, ed. Ronald W. Pierce and Cynthia Long Westfall (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2021), 38.

27. In other words, intersex or trans persons are not excluded. The writer of Genesis 1 would not have had these categories so the text should not be construed in such a way as to exclude them.

3 GETTING TO WORK

1. Mary McDermott Shideler, introduction to *Are Women Human?*, by Dorothy L. Sayers (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1971), 14.
2. Douglas J. Moo and Jonathan A. Moo, *Creation Care: A Biblical Theology of the Natural World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2018), 74.
3. Terence S. Turner, “The Social Skin,” *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 2, no. 2 (2012): 486.
4. John F. Kilner, *Dignity and Destiny: Humanity in the Image of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2015), 314.
5. Kilner, *Dignity and Destiny*, 25.
6. Kilner, *Dignity and Destiny*, 38.
7. Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Justice: Rights and Wrongs* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009), 360.
8. The NIV’s “pains in childbearing” could also be understood as “pains in conception” or “in becoming pregnant.” See David Capes, “Curse or Consequences?, with John Walton: Genesis 3:14-19,” *Exegetically Speaking* (podcast), Wheaton College, May 9, 2022, <https://exegeticallyspeaking.libsyn.com/exegetically-speaking-podcast-curse-or-consequences-with-john-walton-genesis-314-19>.
9. J. Richard Middleton, “A New Earth Perspective,” in *Four Views on Heaven*, ed. Michael E. Wittmer (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2022), 75.
10. Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996), 92.
11. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together* (New York: HarperCollins, 1954), 91.
12. Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 93.
13. Sandra L. Richter, *Stewards of Eden: What Scripture Says About the Environment and Why It Matters* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2020), 78-79.
14. See Meilan Solly, “The True Story of the Aberfan Disaster,” *Smithsonian Magazine*, November 15, 2019, www.smithsonianmag.com/history/true-story-aberfan-disaster-featured-crown-180973565/.
15. See Jane H. Ives, *The Export of Hazard: Transnational Corporations and Environmental Control Issues*, Routledge Library Editions: Multinationals (Oxfordshire, England: Routledge,

1985).

16. See, for example, Isaiah 58; Amos 2:6-8; 5:11; Luke 4:14-21; and James 5:1-6. See Richter, *Stewards of Eden*, for more along these lines.

4 THE HUMAN PROJECT

1. I really have no idea how, but apparently his transition to eternity was markedly different from the norm.

2. For example, Gilgamesh was two-thirds divine and one-third human. Simo Parpola, *The Standard Babylonian Epic of Gilgamesh*, State Archives of Assyria Texts 1 (Helsinki, Finland: Neo-Assyrian Text Corpus Project, 1997), 1:46. See also Kenton L. Sparks, *Ancient Texts for the Study of the Hebrew Bible: A Guide to the Background Literature* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2005), 275.

3. See John H. Walton, *Genesis*, Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2009) 1:43-44.

4. The main argument in favor of this is that the preceding genealogy begins with an affirmation of the image of God/Adam in the birth of Seth, whose line is followed until Noah.

5. For more on this view, see Michael S. Heiser, *The Unseen Realm: Recovering the Supernatural Worldview of the Bible* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham, 2015).

6. Among the eighty movies suggested to me were *Ghost*, *Warm Bodies*, *Zombies*, *Twilight*, *Meet Joe Black*, *City of Angels*, *Hercules*, *Lord of the Rings*, *Dead Like Me*, *Sabrina the Teenage Witch*, *Corpse Bride*, *The Preacher's Wife*, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *Ghost Whisperer*, *Thor*, *Stranger Things*, *Wonder Woman*, *Beowulf*, *Superman*, *Thanos Infinity War*, *Vampire Diaries*, and *The Addams Family*.

7. Heiser, *Unseen Realm*, 102.

8. Heiser, *Unseen Realm*, 108.

9. While most of the biblical story focuses on the human call to live well as the *imago Dei*, Psalm 82 calls angelic beings to account for their injustice.

10. Chiasm lightly adapted from Gordon J. Wenham, "The Coherence of the Flood Narrative," *Vetus Testamentum* 28 (1978): 336-48; and idem, *Genesis 1-15*, Word Biblical Commentary 1 (Dallas: Word, 1987), 155-208.

11. David Smith, "What Hope After Babel?: Diversity and Community in Gen 11:1-9; Exod 1:1-14; Zeph 3:1-13 and Acts 2:1-13," *Horizons in Biblical Theology* 18, no. 2 (1996): 175.

12. Isaiah 14:13-15 could support this.

13. See, for example, Walton, *Genesis*, 1:61-63.

14. J. Richard Middleton, *The Liberating Image: The Imago Dei in Genesis 1* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2005), 169.

15. Though it is possible that the phrase “with its head in the heavens” (Genesis 11:4, my translation) is intended to evoke the great Babylonian temple called Esagil, whose name means “house with a raised head.” See D. Smith, “What Hope After Babel?,” 174.
16. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, 243.
17. José Míguez-Bonino, “Genesis 11:1-9: A Latin American Perspective,” in *Return to Babel: Global Perspectives on the Bible*, ed. John R. Levison and Priscilla Pope-Levison (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1999), 14. The phrase “before the LORD” does not make this a positive assessment. See Genesis 6:11, Leviticus 10:1-2, Numbers 14:37, and Joshua 6:26.
18. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, 240.
19. Míguez-Bonino, “Genesis 11:1-9,” 15.
20. See Haley Goranson Jacob, *Conformed to the Image of His Son: Reconsidering Paul’s Theology of Glory in Romans* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2018), 93.

INTERMISSION

1. “Image of God” by BibleProject (<https://bibleproject.com/explore/video/image-of-god/>). The Hebrew word for “image” is different in the Ten Commandments. While Genesis calls humans a *tselem*, Exodus 20:4 tells them not to make a *pesel*. The words are synonyms. While *tselem* indicates a finished product, *pesel* emphasizes the act of crafting the image.
2. Christopher J. H. Wright, “*Here Are Your Gods*”: *Faithful Discipleship in Idolatrous Times* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2020), 43.

5 THE HUMAN QUEST

1. James K. A. Smith, *You Are What You Love: The Spiritual Power of Habit* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2016).
2. See Nathan Lovell, *The Book of Kings and Exilic Identity: 1 and 2 Kings as a Work of Political Historiography* (New York: T&T Clark, 2021), 218-19.
3. N. T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church* (New York: HarperOne, 2008), 73.
4. Eugene H. Peterson, *Five Smooth Stones for Pastoral Work* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1980), 40.
5. Marc Cortez, *Theological Anthropology: A Guide for the Perplexed* (New York: T&T Clark, 2010), 57-67.
6. Conversely, some churches promise “hot sex” to married couples who do things God’s way. Both approaches oversimplify the complexity of human sexuality and sexual fulfillment.

7. Wesley Hill, *Washed and Waiting: Reflections on Christian Faithfulness & Homosexuality*, updated and expanded (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2016), 94.
8. Hill, *Washed and Waiting*, 92.
9. Hill, *Washed and Waiting*, 89.
10. “Psalm 8,” Visual Bible Commentary, *BibleProject*, March 9, 2021, video, 6:25, www.youtube.com/watch?v=d_-xvaK4wIw. Have you noticed that the book of Psalms contains five smaller collections? Look at the headings in your Bible above Psalms 1, 42, 73, 90, and 107 to see where each book starts.

6 HUMAN SUFFERING

1. Fred Sanders, in a chapel sermon at Talbot School of Theology on Jan 25, 2022, quoting the sermons of Charles Simeon of Cambridge.

7 JESUS, THE HUMAN

1. John presents “Jesus as the true exemplar of humanity” while the Synoptics portray him as the “true Israel.” See Marc Cortez, *ReSourcing Theological Anthropology: A Constructive Account of Humanity in the Light of Christ* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2017), 27. For that reason, we’ll follow John’s portrait of Jesus more closely for this book.
2. Carmen Joy Imes, *Bearing God’s Name: Why Sinai Still Matters* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2019), 139-40.
3. Amy L. B. Peeler, *Women and the Gender of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2022), 174.
4. John records four occasions on which Jesus uses this address: here (John 2:4), with the Samaritan woman (John 4:21), with his mother at the cross (John 19:26), and with Mary Magdalene (John 20:15). In each case, Jesus engages respectfully. Jesus is likely evoking the original partnership between the first man and woman in the Garden of Eden.
5. Peeler, *Women and the Gender of God*, 179.
6. John locates the temple cleansing at the beginning of Jesus’ ministry, providing a lens through which the rest of his activity can be understood, while the other Gospel writers place it prior to his arrest, as the climax of his conflict with Jewish religious leaders. In John, Jesus’ temple cleansing is directed at the commercialization of worship while in the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) the problem is that the temple has become a clubhouse for sinners. Craig S. Keener, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary*, (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2003), 1:527. The two problems are interrelated because the commercialization of worship was by nature exploitative.

7. Charles C. Torrey, ed., *The Lives of the Prophets: Greek Text and Translation*, JBL Monograph Series 1 (Philadelphia: SBL, 1946), 20.
8. Note that Exodus 4:14-16 implies that God had already sent Aaron to meet Moses before Moses even asked for God to do so.
9. Menstrual blood, semen, and skin disease all traverse the liminal space between life and death. Decaying skin is something we'd expect to see on a dead body. When a living person has skin that deteriorates, that person seems to be between life and death. Menstrual blood and semen are substances that create life, but as they are discharged they do so no longer. They in a sense move from life to death. Postpartum blood sustains the life of a baby before birth but is no longer needed after birth. It marks a transition from life to a death of sorts.
10. Matthew Thiessen, *Jesus and the Forces of Death: The Gospels' Portrayal of Ritual Impurity Within First-Century Judaism*, paperback edition (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2021), 96.
11. Thiessen, *Jesus and the Forces of Death*, 83.
12. Thiessen, *Jesus and the Forces of Death*, 73.
13. John Behr, "God's Project and Our Response" (presentation, L. Buss Center for Faith & Culture Conference on Exploring Personhood at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, Louisville, KY, February 10, 2022).
14. See Haley Goranson Jacob, *Conformed to the Image of His Son: Reconsidering Paul's Theology of Glory in Romans* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2018), 126.
15. M. David Litwa, "Behold Adam: A Reading of John 19:5," *Horizons in Biblical Theology* 32 (2010): 135.
16. See also John 4:34, 5:36, and 17:4, which speak of the work that Jesus is finishing. See Gary Manning Jr., "'Paid in Full'?: The Meaning of *tetelestai* in Jesus' Final Words," *The Good Book Blog*, Talbot School of Theology Faculty, Biola University, April 20, 2022, www.biola.edu/blogs/good-book-blog/2022/paid-in-full-the-meaning-of-tetelestai-in-jesus-final-words.

8 A NEW HUMANITY

1. Thanks to Joshua Sherman for pointing this out in personal conversation.
2. In personal conversation, Richard Middleton noted that the Bible does not explicitly take the woman's seed as Messianic. However, it is clear that the one to defeat the serpent would at least be a human descendant of Eve, if not the people of God as a whole. Jesus accomplishes this as our representative (cf. Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 5.21).
3. C. S. Lewis, *The Great Divorce* (New York: Collier, 1946).
4. Stephanie Tait, "Disability Theology Is for Everyone," *Bible for Normal People*, podcast episode 165, May 2, 2021, <https://podcasts.google.com/feed/aHR0cHM6Ly9mZWVkJnBvZGJIYW4uY29tL3RoZWJpY>

[mxlZm9ybm9ybWFscGVvcGxIL2ZlZWQueG1s/episode/M2EwZGM2ODMtODM2MC00YzVjLTgyOGEtNjVjNTEtNmIzNDRI?sa=X&ved=0CAIQulEEahgKEwio04L3z6H6AhUAAAAAHQAAAAAQlwI.](#)

5. James D. G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 67.
6. N. T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church* (New York: HarperOne, 2008), 26.
7. I trust that those whose bodies are destroyed in some way as they die—such as by burning, drowning, explosion, or who are cremated after death—will be restored to their intended form at the resurrection. After all, the bodies of most of those who died in previous centuries have also disintegrated by now. The Creator’s power is not subverted by disaster or decay.
8. Philip F. Reinders, *Seeking God’s Face: Praying with the Bible Through the Year* (Grand Rapids, MI: Faith Alive Christian Resources; Calvin Institute of Christian Worship, 2012), 329; cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Vatican: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2000), §648.
9. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, §665.
10. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, §664.
11. See Patrick Schreiner, *The Ascension of Christ: Recovering a Neglected Doctrine*, Snapshots (Bellingham, WA: Lexham, 2020), chap. 3.
12. For a helpful explanation of the purpose of Old Testament sacrifice and its relation to the book of Hebrews, see chapter 5 of John Goldingay, *Do We Need the New Testament? Letting the Old Testament Speak for Itself*. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2015. Thanks to Richard Middleton for pointing me to this chapter.
13. Thanks to Greg Stump for bringing out this truth in our 2022 Ash Wednesday service at Redeemer Church, La Mirada, CA.
14. Thanks to Cindy Beaver and Joshua Sherman for this insight.
15. Baptism is symbolic of our repentance and entrance into the faith community, but our salvation does not depend on the act itself. However, in the New Testament believers eagerly obeyed Jesus’ command to be baptized.
16. The Greek word translated “again” in the NIV in John 3:3, 7 can also mean “from above.” Jesus may have intended both meanings as a rare type of wordplay.
17. John Hammett, “Human Beings as Persons Created in the Image of God” (presentation at the L. Buss Center for Faith & Culture Conference on Exploring Personhood at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, Louisville, KY, February 11, 2022).
18. Wright, *Surprised by Hope*, 269.
19. J. Richard Middleton, *A New Heaven and a New Earth: Reclaiming Biblical Eschatology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2014), 153.

9 THE BELOVED COMMUNITY

1. Gary M. Burge, Lynn H. Cohick, and Gene L. Green, *The New Testament in Antiquity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2009), 86-91.
2. Archaeologists have found one of the signs posted at the temple, which reads, “No foreigner is to enter within the forecourt and the balustrade around the sanctuary. Whoever is caught will have himself to blame for his subsequent death.” See Clinton E. Arnold, ed., *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002), 2:435. This sign confirms what is clear from Ephesians 2 and Acts 21:28-31.
3. Lynn H. Cohick, *The Letter to the Ephesians*, NICNT (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2020), 348-406.
4. On this whole paragraph, see Cynthia Long Westfall, *Paul and Gender: Reclaiming the Apostle’s Vision for Men and Women in Christ* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2016), 91-105.
5. This section first appeared on my blog, Chastened Intuitions, in 2018: <https://carmenjoyimes.blogspot.com/2018/03>.
6. Stephanie Tait, “Disability Theology Is for Everyone,” *Bible for Normal People*, podcast episode 165, May 2, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cKw4mwMa1xE>.
7. Marc Cortez, *ReSourcing Theological Anthropology: A Constructive Account of Humanity in the Light of Christ* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2017), 116, 120.
8. Ryan S. Peterson, “Created and Constructed Identities in Theological Anthropology,” in *The Christian Doctrine of Humanity: Explorations in Constructive Dogmatics*, ed. Fred Sanders and Oliver D. Crisp (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2018), 137.
9. Peterson, “Created and Constructed Identities in Theological Anthropology,” 143.
10. John F. Kilner, *Dignity and Destiny: Humanity in the Image of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2015), 62-63.
11. Suzanne McDonald, *Re-Imaging Election: Divine Election as Representing God to Others and Others to God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2010), 159-64.
12. Kyle Strobel and John Coe, *Where Prayer Becomes Real: How Honesty with God Transforms Your Soul* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2021), 131.
13. McDonald, *Re-Imaging Election*, 164.
14. Haley Goranson Jacob, *Conformed to the Image of His Son: Reconsidering Paul’s Theology of Glory in Romans* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2018), 201.
15. Wright says, “The great climax of Romans 1–8 is the renewal of all creation.” N. T. Wright, “Excursus on Paul’s Use of Adam,” in *The Lost World of Adam and Eve: Genesis 2–3 and the Human Origins Debate*, by John H. Walton (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2015), 173.
16. Jacob, *Conformed to the Image of His Son*, 249, emphasis original.
17. Jacob, *Conformed to the Image of His Son*, 251.

18. Jacob, *Conformed to the Image of His Son*, 226.
19. As translated by Jacob, *Conformed to the Image of His Son*, 193.
20. Jacob, *Conformed to the Image of His Son*, 251.

10 FROM CREATION TO NEW CREATION

1. N. T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church* (New York: HarperOne, 2008), 50.
2. Anthony Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994); J. Richard Middleton, *A New Heaven and a New Earth: Reclaiming Biblical Eschatology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2014); N. T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church* (New York: HarperOne, 2008).
3. Middleton, *New Heaven and a New Earth*, 184-85.
4. Middleton, *New Heaven and a New Earth*, 185. He also notes Luke 10:17-18 and Revelation 9:1; 12:4, 7-10.
5. Middleton, *New Heaven and a New Earth*, 187.
6. Middleton, *New Heaven and a New Earth*, 192.
7. Middleton, *New Heaven and a New Earth*, 182-89.
8. I owe this insight to G. K. Beale, *The Temple and the Church's Mission: A Biblical Theology of the Dwelling Place of God*, New Studies in Biblical Theology (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2004), 369-72.
9. Eugene H. Peterson, *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction*, 2nd ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 138.
10. See Revelation 1:1, where *apokalypsis* is translated "revelation" in the NIV.
11. For a brief but helpful discussion, see Aaron Chalmers, *Interpreting the Prophets: Reading, Understanding and Preaching from the Worlds of the Prophets* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2015), 136-40.
12. For a discussion of the historicity of the symbols in Revelation, see Michael J. Gorman, *Reading Revelation Responsibly: Uncivil Worship and Witness Following the Lamb into the New Creation* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2010), 20-21.
13. The stars Jesus holds represent the angels (Revelation 1:20), an association that stretches all the way back to Genesis 1:16-18, where stars were to "govern" over the night, facilitating a mental association between cosmic light sources and spiritual rulers. For Jesus to hold the stars indicates his authority over the spiritual realm.
14. Gorman, *Reading Revelation Responsibly*, 97.
15. "I Could Sing of Your Love Forever," lyrics by Martin James Smith, Curious Music UK, 2005.

16. David Mathewson, *A Companion to the Book of Revelation*, Cascade Companions (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2020), 58.

CONCLUSION

1. This quote is from the Master Lectures video companion to the book from Zondervan, but Clay talks about the role of influence in leadership in the book, too. See Clay Scroggins, *How to Lead When You're Not in Charge: Leveraging Influence When You Lack Authority* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2017), 33.
2. Scroggins, *How to Lead When You're Not in Charge*, 157-64.
3. N. T. Wright, "Excursus on Paul's Use of Adam," in *The Lost World of Adam and Eve: Genesis 2-3 and the Human Origins Debate*, by John H. Walton (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2015), 180.

SIDEBAR NOTES

IN THE IMAGE OR AS THE IMAGE

- ^a Bruce K. Waltke and M. O'Connor, *An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1990), 196 (11.2.5).
- ^b It's true that the New Testament uses a preposition when discussing the image in relation to humans and not when talking about Christ (Colossians 1:15; 3:10). I would argue that other factors account for this. In Colossians 3:10 we are being renewed *kata* the image. Here the preposition *kata* with the accusative for "image" indicates either the standard to which we are renewed ("according to") or the reference point ("with reference to"). That is, because sin has alienated us from God, we stand in need of renewal "according to" or "with reference to" God's intentions for our true identity as his image. We must learn to live in alignment with our identity. Second Corinthians 3:18 uses no preposition with humans. Paul simply states that the image (us!) is becoming more glorious as we conform to Christ.
- ^c Waltke and O'Connor, *Introduction to Hebrew Syntax*, 198 (11.2.5e). See also David J. A. Clines, "The Image of God in Man," *Tyndale Bulletin* 19 (1968): 53-103.

SCIENCE AND THE CHRISTIAN

- ^a Alister McGrath, *Science and Religion: A New Introduction*, 3rd ed. (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, 2020).

THE BABYLONIAN “EPIC OF CREATION”

^a “Epic of Creation” (1.111), trans. Benjamin R. Foster, in *The Context of Scripture*, ed. William W. Hallo and K. Lawson Younger (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 1:390-402.

CREATION OF HUMANS IN THE *ENUMA ELISH*

^a “Epic of Creation” (1.111), trans. Benjamin R. Foster, in *Context of Scripture*, ed. William W. Hallo and K. Lawson Younger (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 1:390-402.

^b J. Richard Middleton, *The Liberating Image: The Imago Dei in Genesis 1* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2005), 121.

THE CHRISTIAN AND THE ENVIRONMENT CREATION OF HUMANS IN THE *ENUMA ELISH*

^a Sandra L. Richter, *Stewards of Eden: What Scripture Says About the Environment and Why It Matters* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2020), chap. 6.

THE “FALL” OF SATAN

^a John and J. Harvey Walton argue that Revelation tells us nothing about Genesis 3 but only reuses its imagery to make a point about the current crisis facing the church. John H. Walton and J. Harvey Walton, *Demons and Spirits in Biblical Theology: Reading the Biblical Text in Its Cultural and Literary Context* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2019), chap. 10, esp. 143-47.

^b Michael S. Heiser defends this view in *The Unseen Realm: Recovering the Supernatural Worldview of the Bible* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham, 2015), 73-91.

IS THE BIBLE’S WISDOM UNIQUE?

^a “Instruction of Amenemope,” trans. Miriam Lichtheim, in *The Context of Scripture*, ed. William W. Hallo and K. Lawson Younger (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 1:47.6.11-15.

^b Lichtheim, “Instruction of Amenemope,” 1:47.

- ^c The Amarna Letters and the Mari Letters demonstrate Israel's participation in international relations.

THE PORN PROBLEM

- ^a Belinda Luscombe, "Porn and the Threat to Virility," *Time*, March 31, 2016, <https://time.com/magazine/us/4277492/april-11th-2016-vol-187-no-13-u-s/>.
- ^b James K. Childerston and Debby Wade, "Pornography, Prostitution, and Polyamory," in *Sanctified Sexuality: Valuing Sex in an Oversexed World*, ed. Sandra L. Glahn and C. Gary Barnes (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 2020), 297.
- ^c Childerston and Wade, "Pornography, Prostitution, and Polyamory," 301.
- ^d Childerston and Wade, "Pornography, Prostitution, and Polyamory," 300.
- ^e Jeremy Wiles, "15 Mind-Blowing Statistics About Porn and the Church," Conquer Series, last modified July 11, 2022, www.conquerseries.com/15-mind-blowing-statistics-about-pornography-and-the-church. And yet only 7 percent of churches have a program to address the porn problem.
- ^f Conquer Series, www.conquerseries.com/.

THE GENDER OF JESUS

- ^a Amy L. B. Peeler, *Women and the Gender of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2022).
- ^b Matt Boswell, Matt Papa, and Stuart Townend, "Sing We the Song of Emmanuel," © 2015 by Messenger Hymns, Townend Songs, and Love Your Enemies Publishing. <https://www.stuarttownend.co.uk/song/sing-we-the-song-of-emmanuel/>.
- ^c Amy Beverage Peeler, "The First and Second Adam and Eve: Gender and Representative Humanity" (presentation, L. Buss Center for Faith & Culture Conference on Exploring Personhood at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, Louisville, KY, February 10, 2022).
- ^d Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, III.22.4. Thanks to Joshua Sherman for pointing me to this reference.

RECKONING WITH RACISM

- ^a See Bryan Stevenson, *Just Mercy: A Story of Justice and Redemption* (New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2015), 299-301.
- ^b James H. Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2011), 49.
- ^c “Facts About the Death Penalty,” Death Penalty Information Center, Washington, DC, updated August 18, 2022, <https://documents.deathpenaltyinfo.org/pdf/FactSheet.pdf>. For a plethora of other recent examples, see Stevenson, *Just Mercy*.
- ^d Willie James Jennings, *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010), 6.
- ^e Richard W. Wills Sr., *Martin Luther King Jr. and the Image of God* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 118, 133.

WHAT ABOUT THE RAPTURE?

- ^a Over 75 million copies of these books are in circulation. For an insightful critique of the interpretive, spiritual, theological, and political problems of the Left Behind series, see Michael J. Gorman, *Reading Revelation Responsibly: Uncivil Worship and Witness Following the Lamb into the New Creation* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2010), 71-73. I’m grateful to James-Michael Smith for first helping me rethink the rapture.
- ^b Stanley J. Grenz, *The Millennial Maze: Sorting Out Evangelical Options* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1992), 93.
- ^c Scholarly dispensationalists do not point to this text in support of the rapture, but non-scholars regularly read it this way due to the influence of Larry Norman’s 1969 song, “I Wish We’d All Been Ready.” See Middleton, *A New Heaven and a New Earth*, 227n31.
- ^d Anthony Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994), 168. See also N. T. Wright and Michael F. Bird, *The New Testament in Its World: An Introduction to the History, Literature, and Theology of the First Christians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2019), 424. Note that Acts 1:11 describes this return.

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PRAISE FOR *BEING GOD'S IMAGE*

“Because of Carmen Imes’s warm and inviting prose, readers might not initially realize what a biblical narrative tour de force they receive in this book. From Genesis to Revelation, creation to new creation, Imes leaves no major challenging question unaddressed as she explores the central assertion that all humans are made in God’s image. A wise and able guide, Imes brings clarity, encouragement, and challenge herself as well as introducing numerous other guides so readers can press deeper. Along with *Bearing God’s Name*, *Being God’s Image* will stand as an influential Christian theology of creational flourishing.”

Amy Peeler, associate professor of New Testament at Wheaton College and Graduate School

“To really know who you are, you need to know where you came from. Carmen Imes takes this idea seriously and walks through Genesis and other parts of Scripture to capture God’s plan for creation, especially human image bearers. If you are looking for wisdom on personal identity and calling—and how to love, respect, and partner with fellow humans—this is a steady guide.”

Nijay K. Gupta, professor of New Testament at Northern Seminary

“This insightful, beautifully written book not only provides profound theological depth, it invites us into an all-of-life, practical discipleship that is deeply invested in the flourishing of creation. I’m so grateful for Carmen Imes’s wisdom, scholarship, and compelling vision of what it means to be human.”

Dominic Done, author of *Your Longing Has a Name* and *When Faith Fails: Finding God in the Shadow of Doubt*

“In this companion to *Bearing God’s Name*, Carmen Imes offers a brilliant and compelling study of the *imago Dei*. While *Bearing God’s Name* accents the unique vocation of God’s people, *Being God’s Image* foregrounds the remarkable status, dignity, and value that all humanity shares. Being is not divorced from bearing, but the distinction matters—in particular when thinking about gender, disability, race, suffering, and community. As readers sit at the table enjoying a rich biblical-theological feast, they’re treated to the stories and people from Imes’s journey who reflect the variegated light and life of the One in whose image we all are made.”

Matthew Lynch, associate professor of Old Testament at Regent College and author of *Flood and Fury: Old Testament Violence and the Shalom of God*

“*Being God’s Image* is a useful guide for Christians to see how the Bible explains what it means to be human. By engaging with a range of scholarship and writing with straightforward prose, Carmen Imes paints a hopeful picture in which we may recognize our true selves and be encouraged to live in harmony with our Creator and with others.”

Dennis R. Edwards, dean of North Park Theological Seminary

“Beautifully written and clearly presented, *Being God’s Image* takes the reader on a wonderful journey through Scripture. Carmen Imes clearly displays the wonder of being the creatures called to be God’s image and bear his name, reminding us throughout what an amazing thing it is to be made in the image of God.”

Marc Cortez, professor of theology at Wheaton College and Graduate School

“Carmen Imes succeeds in working through a ‘Bible from end to end’ treatment of the notion of humans as God’s image, and then takes the reader further by considering that notion in the larger context of creation as a whole. *Being God’s Image* is thorough yet accessible, and readers will further benefit from the insightful, natural sidebars Imes sprinkles throughout the book. Never chiding, she deftly navigates common points of Christian division, and in doing so crafts a work

of important biblical scholarship that will be of great benefit to a wide swath of Christian readers.”

Matt Whitman, creator and host of *The Ten Minute Bible Hour*

“The image of God is one of the most foundational ideas in the biblical story and in Christian faith. But it’s a dense, multilayered concept with huge implications for how we understand humanity’s role in the world and in relationship to God. Carmen Imes has given us an accessible and profound exploration of this most important biblical theme. She not only shows what this idea meant in its ancient biblical context but also how it leads into the story of Jesus and the mission of his followers still today.”

Tim Mackie, cofounder of the BibleProject

“Carmen Imes, once again, takes a stock Christian concept—the image of God—and reveals how it is woven into the fabric of the biblical authors’ imaginations. Imes has a rare gift for helping the church to see the beauty and sophistication of the intellectual world of the Bible in plain language. Far from abstract speculation, she grounds us in the nitty-gritty mission of God to the world and how being God’s image directly affects communities and daily lives. The deep structures of Scripture come alive in her capable hands. This is the content I’m here for!”

Dru Johnson, associate professor of biblical and theological studies at The King’s College and author of *Biblical Philosophy: A Hebraic Approach to the Old and New Testaments*

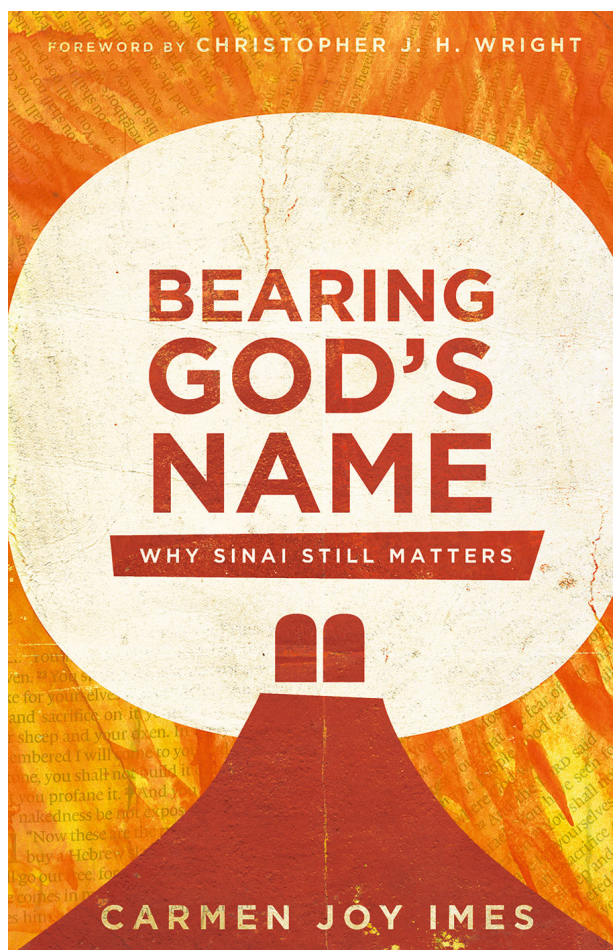
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Figure 1.2: Illustration of ancient Israelite cosmology, by Ben Stanhope. Used by permission.

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